

**Altina the
Sword Princess:
Volume 8**

Yukiya Murasaki

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VIII

Author: Yukiya Murasaki

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the Sword Princess

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VIII





Whimsical Maid
Clarisse

“Hm?
What’s that?”

“Simply
repeat what I
was doing a
moment ago
when you
arrived.”

“Hwah!?”

Altina’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed.

“Why, Princess!
I know what you can do
for Mr. Regis!”

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a green military-style uniform with brown leather straps and a white headscarf. She is holding a rolled-up scroll and looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background is dark and textured.

“It is a pleasure
to make your
acquaintance.
I am Fanrune
Veronica de
Tiraso Laverde of
the Ministry of
Military Affairs.”

Second Daughter of
House Tiraso Laverde
Fanrune



“I can’t put...
any strength
into it.”

“I... I can’t
continue...
as a knight
anymore.”

He choked, gritting his teeth as
he held out his trembling left hand.



Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is. She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

A maid six years older than Altina who has been by the princess's side for as long as she can remember. Altina trusts her from the depths of her heart. While Clarisse is usually silent like a doll, she tends to joke incessantly with anyone she's taken a liking to.

Regis Aurick

Fifth-grade administrative officer.

A bibliophile who dreamed of becoming a librarian in the military library. He was an abject failure in the military academy, unable to swing a sword, draw a bow, or even ride a horse. The abundance of knowledge he has obtained from his books does give him some talent as a tactician, however.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

First-grade combat officer. The new head of the House of Balzac, famous for its outstanding swordsmanship. Despite having inherited his house's aptitude for swordplay, Eddie has never cut down a person on the battlefield. The sword he carries, the Défendre Sept, has been passed down in his family since the days of the first emperor.

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgarian Empire. When the real Auguste was assassinated, his younger sister Felicia stood in and assumed his identity. As of now, she has abandoned her claim to the throne and is living in Fort Volks with Eddie.





Eric
Mickaël de
Blanchard

A Belgarian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénézay's army, he was deeply impressed by Regis's command, and personally volunteered to be sent to the front lines to chase after the man he respected so much.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt



Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He would spend his days as the de facto commander of Fort Sierck drinking and gambling, but he surrendered this position when Altina bested him in a duel.





Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Detesting the very notion of getting involved in power struggles, he left Belgaria to study in High Britannia. Frustrated that his siblings were being handed treasured swords left and right, he may or may not have secretly made off with the Vite Espace Trois.

Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Second prince of the Belgarian Empire. The son of the queen, he possesses talent in both military and civil affairs. While officially serving as the commander of the First Army, he has seized control over the entire imperial army in the stead of his elderly father and the sickly first prince.

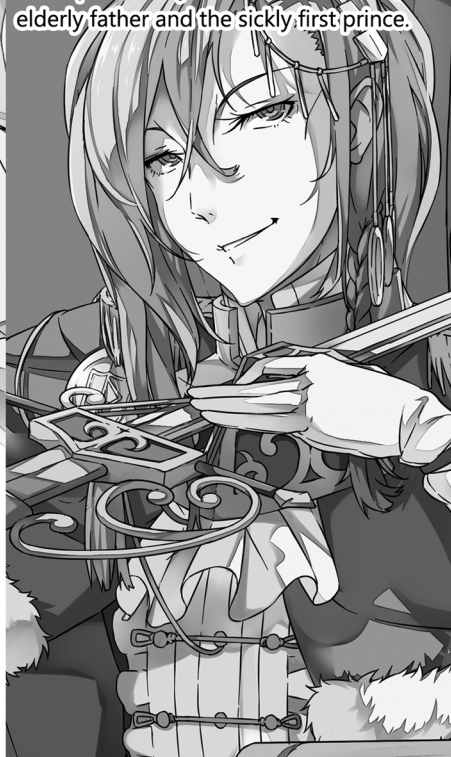




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The story so far—

Inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves, Regis Aurick is a hopeless soldier who spends his days buried in books.

The year is 850 on the Belgianian imperial calendar—

Having been banished to Fort Sierck on the northern front, Regis was approached by the tenacious Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—“Altina” for short—a stunning young woman whose imperial lineage was denoted by her crimson hair and red eyes. The daughter of a commoner, she was shunned by the queen and other high nobles, eventually being appointed commander of a faraway border regiment at the unprepared age of fourteen.

Under normal circumstances, her time would have been spent idly, the empty title making her little more than a decoration. But the impassioned princess, having spent her adolescence caught between internal struggles for power, aspires for something greater. She has seen the strife caused by self-seeking nobles—the ruthless taxation and pointless wars—and so resolves to change the country!

“I’m going to become empress. I need your wisdom.”

Altina soon proves her mettle as a commander by taking on the hero Jerome, and while Regis feels no more confident in his own abilities, he swears to work as her tactician.

By repurposing the strategies from books he’d read over his life, Regis manages to gain the allegiance of a barbarian army, take down an impregnable fortress, and bolster the forces of Altina’s border regiment.

And so the year turns to 851—

At the beginning of April, Altina makes her return to the imperial palace of La Branne. Regis is initially overwhelmed, but he ultimately secures the cooperation of rising noble Elenore, while First Prince Auguste—or at least, who everyone believes to be Auguste—rescinds his right as next in line to the throne. He expresses his desire for Altina to take his place, and as a result, she is finally established as a prominent candidate to become empress.

On April 23rd, High Britannia, the nation that has exhibited the greatest advancements in industrial technology, issues a declaration of war.

Appearing to have colluded with High Britannia, the Grand Duchy of Varden chooses this opportunity to launch an attack on Fort Volks.

Regis's scheme sends them running in a single night, but an archer in the famous mercenary brigade Renard Pendu manages to shoot down the young knight Eric, while Altina's treasured blade—the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*—is broken in combat.

Despite these developments, the border regiment is forced to march west to answer a call for reinforcements. Regis's elder sister makes an appearance along the way, and they entrust the broken sword to her husband (and Regis's brother-in-law) Enzo for repairs.

On May 19th, the Battle of La Frenge takes place. Led by Bargesonne, a lieutenant general valuing tradition above all else, the Empire's Seventh Army forms a tightly knit formation and charges their foe. However, when pitted against High Britannia's newest firearms, the Belgarian Army's attack leads only to catastrophic losses. In the end, the lieutenant general dies in battle, along with half of his troops.

There is no possible way to defeat such weapons—that is what the remnants of the Seventh Army believe, having completely lost the will to go on. And it is to these disheartened men that Regis makes a proposition.

“We should just give up fighting them on land, and attack from the sea instead. High Britannia won't be able to receive supplies if they don't have any transport ships.”

Meanwhile, Second Prince Latrielle, marshal general of the Belgarian Army, falls victim to a surprise attack from Mercenary King Gilbert. The encounter leaves Latrielle partially blinded, but he conceals his ailment to protect both his troops' morale and his chances at seizing the throne.

Altina is promptly summoned to a strategy meeting with the prince, during which her border regiment is combined with the remaining western forces to become the Empire's Fourth Army. Regis, as her strategist, is also promoted to third-grade administrative officer, subsequently becoming Regis d'Aurick.

And so, leaving the capital's defenses to Latrielle, Altina makes for the sea.

The High Britannian Royal Navy has in its arsenal the Princess-class, a steam-powered ship of the line boasting seventy-four guns. It is fast, sturdy, and unaffected by the wind, with powerful cannons to boot. In contrast, Belgaria's ships are all old sailing vessels.

However, by using information from the local fishermen and the numerous plans he had read in his books, Regis manages to defy the odds. Serving as admiral proxy, he leads the Western Liberation Fleet to a swift victory, managing to take out the enemy fleet.

Port Ciennbourg is quickly reclaimed, but the High Britannian supply unit stationed there has already set off over land. Allowing them to reach their destination would put the capital at even greater risk, and so the Fourth Army moves to rout them. They are up against Mercenary King Gilbert, his elites, and thousands of guards armed with the latest rifles, with the battle due to take place in the western regions of La Frengé.

A great number of casualties are expected, but by spreading lake water across the area, Regis causes a thick fog to set in that renders the enemy's guns near powerless. But the Mercenary King does not go down so easily. He launches a surprise attack on the Fourth Army's main camp... but to no avail. He is bested in combat by Altina, the newly improved *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* in her hands.

And so, the Belgarian Army puts a stop to the High Britannian invasion. Latrielle returns to the imperial palace to deliver the news, but the behavior he witnesses is completely unbecoming of a nation-threatening crisis. The emperor spends his time indulging in pleasures, and upon seeing him succumb to such depravity, the prince's anger finally reaches breaking point. His hand moves to his treasured sword, the *Armée Victoire Volonté*...

Preface: War is Over

The bloodstained earth around Regis was littered with innumerable bodies, the air thick with a sickening metallic stench. Severed hands, cleaved heads, internal organs—all trampled beneath the shoes of a man in a dark-red robe. There was a three-pronged trident in his hand, and his eyes brimmed with murderous intent.

He shouldn't have been there. He *couldn't* have been there. Regis had planned more than enough to avoid this exact scenario.

My plan... Did I even come up with one? What was it, exactly?

He couldn't remember the measures he had taken. A growing sense of unease swirled in his chest—the suffocating helplessness that came from knowing his plan so shamelessly stolen from a book hadn't worked.

The man with the trident drew ever nearer. Still overwhelmed with confusion, Regis scrambled to get away, turning his back and running as fast as his legs would allow. But no sooner had he attempted to escape than he uncouthly tumbled to the earth. Something had tripped him... but what?

He looked down to see that decaying hands had sprouted from the earth, grasping his ankles.

A corpse?!

Before he could even respond, more hands burst forth and grabbed onto his wrists. These really were corpses. And as Regis frantically tried to shake them off, a fallen head, cleaved in two, whispered to him.

“Your plan... Why? Why would you send me to my death?”

Regis screamed, tearing off the blanket he was under and springing up. White pillars and deep-red cloth almost seemed to materialize before him, and through a glass window, he could see green hills and the blue sky slowly streaming past. He was panting like a tired dog, and his heart pounded so violently in his chest that it almost hurt.

When Regis came to his senses, he realized he was in a carriage, having fallen asleep across several seats. The woman sitting across from him hurried to his side, kneeling down and peering into his face.

“Are you all right, Mr. Regis?”

It was Clarisse, the maid, staring at him fixedly. Regis slowly came to realize that the horrifying experience had been no more than a

nightmare.

“In my... dream...”

“Yes?”

“A soldier asked... why I sent him to his death.”

His nightmare likely stemmed from the memory of all those they had so recently lost in battle. Regis’s proposal had resulted in the deaths of many soldiers, producing far more sacrifices than he had anticipated. Perhaps it was also a consequence of directly taking on Gilbert, the man considered the strongest in the continent, and witnessing his relentless bloodlust up close—especially considering that Regis could barely even swing a sword to defend himself.

He knew a few holy words that were usually offered to the deceased, but saying them felt pointless. His breathing refused to slow, and he had gasped in so much air that his lungs were starting to ache.

“Mr. Regis...”

Clarisse reached out her arm and wrapped it around him, pulling his face into her chest. He could feel the gentle throbbing of her heartbeat, the warm and tender embrace reminding him of the mother he had lost so long ago. His mouth and nose were now buried in fabric, yet strangely enough, it was easier to breathe; the slow, rhythmic pulsations seemed to have soothed his nerves.



“Hah...” Regis allowed the strength to drain from his tightly clenched fists.

“Have you calmed down?”

“Er... Yes, thank you,” he replied, his voice muffled against her body.

“Fufu... That tickles, you know.”

“Ahem. Thank you for helping me. I’m okay now.”

“You don’t want me holding you?”

“N-Not exactly, but...”

Regis wasn’t sure how to answer. His mind was still recovering from the nightmare, or so he thought—the sudden reminder that he was currently buried in Clarisse’s chest wiped away the negative thoughts and sent his heart racing once again.

She wrapped her arms around him tighter, pushing him back against his seat. He had always thought her bosom was ample enough to stand out even beneath an apron, but never had he imagined it would be so soft.

Is it rude of me to hold such an opinion? Who am I to even think about the physical characteristics of a woman I’m not married to?

As these peculiar thoughts spun through Regis’s mind, Clarisse whispered to him, her lips so close they were almost against his ear. “Mr. Regis... You don’t have to shoulder this alone.”

It was then that he realized what was going on—she was trying to ease the concerns weighing on his mind. He didn’t know why exactly she was holding him in such a way, but he understood it was being done out of kindness.

“Thank you. But I have my position to uphold.”

Regis was aware that he could no longer conduct himself in the same manner as when he was a fifth-grade administrative officer. More power came with more responsibility—this was simply how rank worked. Back then, his job was to give his opinion; it was down to the upper brass whether or not his words were taken into consideration. But now, there was a constant feeling of pressure—one that he believed there was no way to escape from. The moment someone with authority stopped fearing the consequences, a grave danger would surely befall them.

Clarisse slowly stroked Regis’s head, twirling a finger through his hair. “You’re always working so hard when you’re awake. You should at least be able to rest your mind when you’re asleep.”

“To me, it feels like I’m not working enough.”

“You’re doing plenty.”

“I’m putting in the effort, sure. But my lackluster results speak for themselves.”

“You only see things that way because you’re always setting your sights higher and higher, Mr. Regis.”

“Hm...? I’ve never heard that one before.”

Back at the academy, Regis had always neglected to improve his swordsmanship or horseback-riding skills, instead preferring to spend time with books. He was regularly chastised for this, earning him a reputation as an unmotivated failure, though his behavior remained unchanged no matter how much he was reprimanded. His obsession with reading continued even after he was picked up by Marquis Thénézay, which led to him getting regularly screamed at by his superiors.

Things were hardly any different now that he was in the Beilschmidt border regiment, though he was at least getting shouted at less often. There was no doubt in his mind that he had been born without ambition.

“Well, you may be aiming higher, but I suppose you’ve still only got eyes for books.”

“Hah... I guess so.”

“But if you’re so concerned about winning battles without any fatalities, doesn’t that mean there’s already something you aspire to?”

“That’s... certainly one way to look at it.”

“Respecting and mourning the dead is important. You must be considerate of their bereaved families too. But Mr. Regis... please don’t forget all those you’ve managed to save.”

“I... I haven’t.”

“Are you sure? I’m only alive right now because of you.”

“Ah...”

Clarisse was enlisted in the campaign as maid to the commander—that is, Altina—and usually rode in the carriage with Regis while the princess was out on her trusty steed. Had they lost the battle, there was a high chance that Clarisse might have died along with the soldiers.

“Can you feel the life in me?”

“Y-Yeah...”

He could feel her heart continue to beat. Her skin was soft, her body invitingly warm...

“You’re the one who protected me.”

“Yeah...”

“So for now, I’m going to protect you.”

“...Thank you.”

“From your dreams.”

“Yeah.”

“And from the princess. If that’s possible, at least.”

“What...?”

With that, Clarisse loosened her hold on Regis, who looked up from the warmth he had almost melted into. The faintly reddened cheeks that caught his eye only reaffirmed his belief that the woman before him was alluring beyond words, but as he examined her expression closer, he noticed that her brow was furrowed and her smile somewhat troubled.

Regis followed her gaze to the carriage door. Altina was standing right outside, fixing them with a hard glare, her face as red as scorched stone.

“Might I ask what you’re doing there, Regis?” Her voice was cold, exuding an aura of malice that didn’t fall short of the Mercenary King in his dreams. All the while, her right hand strangled the hilt of the sword on her waist.

“M-Me?!”

“I came rushing over the moment I heard a scream, and what do I find when I arrive?!”

A scream? Now that I think about it, I do remember yelping when I woke up...

“I... I had a nightmare...”

“A nightmare?! Then why d’you look so happy?!”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong!” Regis stammered. Being hugged into Clarisse’s chest had cheered him up in an instant, but he was neither ignorant nor thoughtless enough to say that out loud.

“Now, now, Princess,” Clarisse soothingly chirped, “I used to do this for you as well.”

“Erk... That was when I was a child, though.”

“I still try to this day, but you always run from me.”

“That’s because it’s embarrassing! I’m an adult now!” Altina protested, sticking out her lips in a pout. Her murderous intent had completely vanished, causing Regis to exhale a relieved sigh.

“Mr. Regis has been working this whole time, so of course he’s tired,” Clarisse said, her expression now serious. “His job is to consider things from every angle, so his mind and soul are both worn out.”

Altina paused in thought. “Mn... Well, you’re right. From defending Fort Volks, to aiding the Seventh Army’s retreat, to reclaiming Port Ciennbourg, to chasing the Mercenary King... It’s just been one battle after another, and Regis devised the plans for them all.”

It was the evening of June 4th, with Varden and Franziska having attacked Fort Volks on April 30th. In just over a month, they had traveled across the Empire and fought in four battles.

“Well, strategizing is the only thing I’m capable of,” Regis said meekly. He was definitely tired, though the soldiers were probably

feeling even worse.

Altina looked rather apologetic. “Maybe I can work on my planning skills and ease the burden on you a little...”

“No, you’ve already helped me out plenty. Our main headquarters was attacked, both when defending Fort Volks and taking on the Mercenary King. If you were anyone else, I would have lost both times.”

“I appreciate that, but me swinging my sword around isn’t enough to capture a fortress, nor is it enough to sink a battleship.”

“We were really lucky in those cases,” Regis replied, his lips curling into a wry smile. *I think we’ve been over this already...*

“There isn’t that much available out here, but if you need anything at all, just say the word. I’ll do what I can to get it for you.”

Well, there is a book I want—that was what Regis was about to say, but knew they wouldn’t find one on the battlefield. Second on the list was a holiday. It wasn’t just for him, though—the operation the previous night meant that everyone was exhausted. The battle had ended early that morning, but their fatigue had piled up to such an extent over the consecutive engagements that it was unlikely they would move again for the rest of the day.

After what they had been through, Regis was unsure whether one day was even long enough to constitute a rest, but they couldn’t afford to sit back and relax any longer. They intended to return to Versailles by the 9th, so the troops would need to be up on their feet again by the next morning. What they would do from there, however, was still undecided; Regis had a few ideas, but it would ultimately depend on whatever state the capital was in when they arrived.

The report announcing the Fourth Army’s victory was due to reach the ongoing battle near the capital around the 6th. The enemy would probably retreat upon receiving the news... but where to? And how would Latrielle’s First Army move?

Judging by his personality, is he going to pursue them? The soldiers surely wouldn’t like that; a battle on the open plains would mean great casualties, and Latrielle was surely aware of such a fact. But even so, Regis needed to make preparations with a number of possibilities in mind.

The young princess’s face suddenly drew near, causing Regis to inadvertently pull back. She was a girl whose beauty had earned her much envy in the imperial court, of all places, and the way he saw it, she had only grown more radiant since then. When she came so close and stared straight into his eyes, it was all he could do to not show his bashfulness.

“Wh-What is it?” he asked.

“Your face. That’s not the look of someone who’s thinking about a

reward.”

“O-Oh, me? Haha... Well, what do I want...? Yes, right... In that case...”

“Books are a no-go.”

“We *are* still on the battlefield, I suppose. Hm... I’m getting pretty thirsty, so I guess I’ll take some water.”

“Some water? You’ll make me look like a terrible commander, asking for something that meager. I’ll prepare a proper reward for you at a later date, but for now, isn’t there anything else you want?”

The more Regis thought about it, the harder the question was to answer. He wanted some rest time, but his drowsiness had since vanished. He was hungry, but dinner was being served soon anyway. Under such circumstances, money was the most standard request, but that would be more trouble than it was worth.

After all, a monetary transfer within the regiment means three more pages of paperwork for me to fill out...

All of a sudden, Clarisse clapped her hands together—a gesture that implied she had come up with a brilliant idea. “Why, Princess! I know what you can do for Mr. Regis!”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“Simply repeat what I was doing a moment ago when you arrived.”

“Hwah?!” Altina’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed. Regis’s reaction wasn’t much better.

“Wh-Wh-What are you suggesting here, Ms. Clarisse?! That’s not something a person should joke about!”

He may have been made a chevalier, but the title wasn’t yet official, so he was essentially still a commoner. Meanwhile, Altina was royalty—the fourth princess, second in line to the throne, and a lieutenant general in command of the Empire’s Fourth Army. She wasn’t a child anymore either, meaning that her brushing up against the opposite sex wouldn’t be taken so innocently.

“Oh, you don’t want her to?” Clarisse asked plainly.

“Th-That’s not the issue!”

“Mrk...” Altina immediately hopped aboard the carriage. “Care to explain, Regis? Why is it okay for Clarisse to do it, but not me?”

“I didn’t mean it like that! Really!”

“Then how *did* you mean it? I... You know... I-I’ve been growing a lot lately!”

“What are you talking about?!”

Altina reached out her hands and grabbed Regis by the head. He could tell she was incredibly nervous; she was wearing a focused expression as though she were about to lock blades, and she was gripping with such strength that a sharp pain shot through his temple.

Then, with all her might, she yanked him toward her.

Regis could do nothing but watch on in a daze as he was pulled straight into Altina's chest... plate.

"Wait! You have your armor—!"

"Ah."

Clunk. His nose smacked hard against tempered metal.

Chapter 1: News of His Death

Imperial Year 851, June 5th, early morning—

Here and there, the preparations for breakfast were underway. Regis noticed that a line of some sort had formed, the men lining up regardless of unit and rank, each with a sword or spear in hand. He walked to the front, wondering what was going on; the soldiers coming back in the opposite direction all seemed to be grinning at their weapons.

Up ahead, Regis could hear the clanging of a metal hammer striking iron. A group of non-combatants had gathered in one corner of the camp—the blacksmiths. As weapons were worn with continual use, an army beyond a certain size would take in men of such a profession. Regis could understand why the soldiers would want their weapons repaired, given that they had just finished battle, but he wasn't sure why so many had come at once. Was it because they had fought four times in such quick succession?

Their unit employed around a hundred smiths. Using impromptu furnaces and with only a cloth shade to protect them from the sun, they set up smitheries in the open air.

The Fourth Army currently had thirteen thousand troops, meaning that each smith was responsible for the weapons of one hundred and thirty people. To make matters worse, they were naturally short-handed; their preparations before embarking on this campaign left much to be desired, and many of the smiths deployed in the Second Army had taken flight during their devastating loss. They were short of cooks and barbers too.

We need to either start recruiting or cut down the number of soldiers we have, Regis thought as he walked. But his musings were cut short when he spotted a bear of a man pounding his anvil at the center of the blacksmiths.

“Wha—?!”

Regis hastened his steps. The man that the Fourth Army's soldiers were entrusting their weapons to was none other than Enzo Bardot Smith, Regis's brother-in-law and a smith of Rouenne. They had left Altina's treasured sword in his care, which he had then brought all the way to the battlefield.

“What are you doing, Enzo?”

“Oh! Reggie, my boy! I had some time on my hands, so I'm

helping out.”

“You don’t have to, really. Our army has its own exclusive blacksmiths, and we’re not a business, so we can’t just take on outsiders...”

“Yeah, figured as much. But y’know...”

As they conversed, a topless man raced over from another stall. It was Thomas, the head blacksmith. He was in his forties, had served under Jerome since the time the general still lived in the capital, and was the sort of person to dress down even a noble for not maintaining their weapon properly.

“Tactician!”

“Ah... M-My apologies,” Regis stuttered. “Mr. Smith here isn’t too well-read on the military, and—”

“He’s fantastic!”

“Pardon?”

“What he did with the new *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* was so magnificent, I just *had* to ask him to teach me a thing or two! And then, guess what? Those test pieces came out even better than new! Now everyone’s coming to him with work.”

“Is that so...?” Regis replied, keeping his thoughts on the matter deliberately ambiguous. There didn’t seem to be an issue after all; Enzo was apparently working among the army’s blacksmiths because they had asked him to.

Enzo awkwardly scratched his head. “I was just working normally...”

“I’ve always heard great things about the blacksmiths’ union in Rouenne, but this... This is something else!”

Enzo’s large frame seemed to grow smaller and smaller under Thomas’s excessive praise. That was when his apprentice, a young man called Lionel, entered the conversation.

“Aha! Rouenne blacksmiths come in all sorts, but the boss is special. He doesn’t speak much, so he isn’t all that well known, but there aren’t many out there who work iron as well as he can.”

“Give me a break...” Enzo muttered, pulling Lionel back by his shirt with a sour look on his face.

Regis gave a nod. “Well, if nobody’s complaining then I have no reason to stop you.”

“Complaining? Far from it!” Thomas exclaimed, picking up and proudly showing off a sword. “I really can’t believe this is a military-issued model. Look at how it glimmers! It’s practically one of those famous swords the nobles carry!”

“I see...” Regis’s complete lack of sword skills meant he couldn’t tell whether a blade was well made or not, but the head blacksmith’s eyes were positively sparkling.

“He just hammered and sharpened it a little, and look what it turned into! It’s almost like magic!”

To Regis, it sounded like Thomas was making a mountain out of a molehill, but the surrounding blacksmiths and soldiers chimed in with agreement, saying things like “Exactly!” and “Yeah, magic!”

Enzo was looking more and more embarrassed. “Ah, no... All I did was straighten the blade and rasp out a few scuffs... Isn’t that normal for a smith?”

“Yeah, but a normal smith can’t straighten a sword with a single strike,” Lionel said with a smirk. “Most also have to compensate for uneven rasping by making adjustments in other areas; perfectly filing the entire surface like you do isn’t supposed to be humanly possible.”

“You just have to get used to it, that’s all.”

Thomas nodded along. “Right, right... And then it’s all down to willpower. Finishing something at that quality takes more time than an army blacksmith has. We have to be done as quickly as we can, so even a rough job works for us. That’s what I used to think, at least, but I was naïve. It’s like my eyes have been pulled wide open.”

“That wasn’t what I was trying to—”

“I’m grateful, if anything! If you wouldn’t mind, please let my apprentices watch too.”

“Sure. Anytime you want. I’ve got nothing to hide.” With that, Enzo took a sword from one of the soldiers in line and stared at it hard. “Hm... The blade’s wearing out at an angle. You’re not swinging it straight.”

The soldier scratched his head in embarrassment, his friends all laughing in amusement. Meanwhile, Enzo peeled away the leather grip.

“Knew it. The hilt’s a little crooked. I can fix that.”

He removed the blade from the hilt and promptly basked it in the heat of the furnace, then transferred it to the anvil and gave it two good strikes. From there, he handed it to his apprentice and gave one simple order.

“Make a new handle.”

“Yes, boss!”

Enzo then took a spear from the next soldier. “This one just needs a good sharpen,” he said, immediately getting to work with a metal rasp. Ever so slowly, the blade regained its splendor before their very eyes. His appraisals were swift and accurate, with every move he made serving a deliberate purpose. The surrounding smiths watched with bright eyes, Thomas included.

“Doesn’t get any less amazing no matter how many times I see it! This really is magic! As expected of the tactician’s brother-in-law!”

“Eh?!” Regis exclaimed, shaking his head in a panic as his name

came up out of seemingly nowhere. “I’ve got nothing to do with this!”

But rumors would spread in whatever form made them the most interesting. The tactician was already a wizard, and his brother-in-law a magician in his own right.

June 8th, early morning—

It was the second day of the march. At the center of the camp, a large tent was erected as a temporary headquarters, in the middle of which sat a long table surrounded with chairs.

The commander Altina was seated closest to the back, with Regis to her immediate right—a position that would always be his. To her left was Brigadier General Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt, captain of the Black Knight Brigade, and seated across from them was Lieutenant General Benjamin Emanuel de Beaumarchais with his younger brother Justin Gabriel. Clarisse stood in the corner, as silent, expressionless, and unmoving as a doll.

Regis spread a map over the table. “We’ve left defending the western front to the armies of the resident nobles. They have two Princess-class ships seized from High Britannia and the allegiance of a few sailors who know how to operate them, so I imagine they’ll be able to put up a decent fight if need be. Additionally...” He produced a note. “We’ve received word from Admiral Bertram. They managed to transport the Princess-class with the busted engine to the shipyard. Once our engineers dismantle and reverse engineer it, the Empire should be able to produce something of comparable quality.”

“How long will that take?” Jerome asked.

Regis pulled out another piece of paper. “This is the estimate. They should be able to produce an imitation of every individual part within two years.”

“And we’ve only got two ships until then, eh? How terribly reassuring...”

“We’ll be able to replicate the cannons much quicker. Imperial Elswicks could be ready to test-fire as soon as next month.”

“Hm... Get us in on those tests. Have a few sent our way.”

“Very well. I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

Regis had to tip his hat to Jerome’s blatant lust for power—the man possessed an exorbitant amount of strength, and yet here he was seeking out even more.

While a complex steam engine would prove challenging to replicate, the cannons were relatively simple. There were already men hard at work recreating them, and so long as they could match their firing range, Belgaria wouldn’t one-sidedly lose against High Britannia’s next wave of ships. It would, of course, be a hard-fought

battle if the enemy immediately moved to attack again, but based on what the High Britannian prisoners of war had revealed, their navy had approached this war rather half-heartedly to begin with. Troops were reluctantly dispatched only because Oswald Coulthard had proposed the plan and Queen Margaret Stillart had given the order.

Though you have to take into account that this information is coming from prisoners. There's a chance they're just saying that they didn't really want to fight because they lost.

Whatever the case, both Oswald and Margaret, the instigators of this war, were currently away from their home country. Sending out more ships would most likely require them to impair their own national defenses, so the chance of that happening was exceedingly low.

"...It seems that really was Queen Margaret with their army—our captives' testimonies even confirmed it. I've never heard anything about her being a fighter, though..."

Regis struggled to understand. Belgaria was a nation whose army dominated the entire continent; accompanying a force invading such a place was an incredibly dangerous endeavor. She must have been exceedingly confident in their latest guns and cannons, or perhaps she placed a great amount of trust in Oswald. It was also possible that she was just overly optimistic.

When Regis spotted her, she was riding in a black carriage. He didn't get the impression that she knew her way around a sword or a horse, though he'd never actually spoken to her before, and the fact that she had only recently been crowned meant that information was scarce. There was no way for him to determine her motives.

"Hah!" Jerome scoffed. "Just goes to show, the queen of damned fools is a damned fool herself!"

Perhaps not the most appropriate words to describe a ruler, but there was no doubting that Margaret was abnormal. Had she been captured, the ransom demanded would have jeopardized High Britannia's national budget, and not paying up would have had them branded a nation that chose money over its own queen.

"In their situation, I'd personally separate the queen from the rest of the army, having her detour all the potential battlefields to return to her nation. But what will Oswald Coulthard do...?"

"Hah! If she were the sort to play along with that, she wouldn't have accompanied them to begin with!"

"Ah. You do have a point..."

Regis inadvertently found his eyes wandering to Altina. Jerome was looking at her too.

"Mrk." The princess let out a surprised noise, then pursed her lips in a pout. "What? I would never do something that reckless."

“It’s not much worse than dueling a war hero, or charging straight into an impenetrable fortress,” Regis said with a shrug.

“Grr...” Despite the princess’s best attempts to refute him, it seemed she was unable to come up with a sound argument; she did nothing in response but frustratedly grit her teeth.

But maybe that recklessness is a thing of the past now, Regis thought. Altina had recently learned to settle down at the main camp, no longer charging ahead to the front lines. On that note, he decided to change the topic.

“Based on the lady doctor’s diagnosis, it will take three months for the former Duke Balzac’s broken right arm to heal.”

“He said it was hard for him to stick around the capital since Eddie ran off with Auguste,” Altina explained.

Regis nodded. “We’ve essentially dragged him into our war. We should at least let him stay with our army until his wounds have healed.”

“And he’ll be with Eddie once we get back to Fort Volks!”

Regis nodded again. *Next on the agenda...* “How do we intend to deal with the Mercenary King?”

Altina let out a small groan, a conflicted expression crossing her face. Jerome, meanwhile, crossed his arms and remained silent.

“He should naturally be put to the gallows,” Benjamin declared.

Altina smacked the table at this remark, pushing herself to her feet. “Definitely not!”

“And why’s that?” Benjamin asked, staring at the princess rather perplexed. “It’s simply Belgarian convention—those who surrender without a fight can be made into retainers, but the moment hostilities commence, the enemy commander is to be executed, no matter how quickly they raise the white flag.”

“I mean... it’s a complete waste!”

“We’re talking about a vulgar mercenary here!”

“Whether you’re a mercenary or a member of royalty, what does it matter? Strength is strength! Imagine what a reliable ally he would make.”

“What?! An ally?! You mustn’t make such jokes, Princess!”

Benjamin wasn’t the only one taken aback: Justin behind him looked equally surprised. That was simply how irrational such a suggestion was in the Empire.

“Kukuh...” Jerome’s shoulders bounced as he let out a small chuckle. “He’s definitely strong—stronger than any of the cowards in the capital.”

“But the imperial army must uphold a certain level of dignity! To make a subject of someone who should be executed, and for such a trivial reason... I stand firmly against it!”

“Guahahah! Don’t tell me you’re worried about falling even further down the pecking order.”

“Y-You’re suggesting that *mercenary* is above me?!” Benjamin shouted. His face had turned a deep shade of red.

“Hmph. Of course he is. Do you think you can dodge my lance? Sure, your title might protect you in the courts, but the battlefield doesn’t give a shit who’s a commoner and who’s a marquis.”

“Such impudence! A mere margrave thinks he can mock me?!”

“See? That right there—that’s what I’m talking about. First thing you do is hide behind your title. That’s why you’re always going to be weak.”

“To act so insolent right before the princess... I can’t possibly overlook such a transgression!”

“Your overblown self-importance is none of my business, but think more carefully ’bout who you’re snapping at, would you? I could separate your head from your body before you’ve even got a chance to regret your actions.”

“C-Curse you! A blight on your house!”

The blood was clearly rushing to Benjamin’s head; it seemed as though he might start foaming at the mouth at any moment.

Regis sighed. Up to that point, they had been somewhat united against a common foe, but this solidarity wasn’t easy to maintain. Benjamin was a high noble. Having lived much of his life in the imperial court, he was of the impression that it was only natural for those ranked below him to regard him with respect. Jerome, however, loathed all those nobles who acted high and mighty without the skills to back it up. The two men mixed as well as oil and water.

In a book, they would reconcile while surmounting an impossible challenge... Regis mused. But Jerome only cared about whether or not people were useful, while Benjamin was steeped in the court’s sense of values.

It seemed the Second Army was too often stationed at the capital. While they had been the first to engage High Britannia during this war, that was by pure coincidence: they had just happened to be in the west for highly political reasons. Under normal circumstances, they were meant to protect the emperor and the capital alongside the First Army, which meant they were lacking in real combat experience.

Benjamin had simply inherited his father’s title and military rank, having barely any accomplishments to his name. If anything, the fact that he hadn’t made any sizable blunders in his youth might have been considered his biggest achievement. To compete against Jerome or the Mercenary King in martial might was much too conceited, even if that was a hill the lieutenant general was willing to die on.

This temperament was one shared by many nobles who lived in

the palace for too long. There had been a few such men in Regis's previous army as well. They were born into affluence, raised without inconvenience, and permitted whatever selfish whims they might have desired. In that regard, it was safe to say they were raised under the illusion that they themselves ruled the world. Even those among them who worked to improve and gain knowledge, learning how to properly conduct themselves, never seemed to rear any self-restraint; once their emotions were heightened, they would stubbornly assert their own importance like an infant.

In any case, a duel is the last thing we need.

As a joint front, the Fourth Army was rather haphazardly held together. There was already enough discord between the Beilschmidt border regiment and those formerly in the Second Army.

I should start by calming Benjamin down enough that he can consider the situation rationally. Then I'll offer some justification that should de-escalate things without injuring his pride. But no sooner had that thought crossed Regis's mind than Altina sprang into action herself.

"Sir Benjamin, are you confident that you can defeat Jerome in combat?" she asked. The seriousness in her eyes seemed to take Benjamin by surprise.

"Princess...?!"

Regis cradled his head, wondering why she was adding fuel to the flames. But it seemed she had asked out of genuine curiosity.

"It'd be an astounding feat if you could," she said. "I've seen him fight up close. Give him a lance and a horse, and he's probably stronger than both the Mercenary King *and* Latrielle."

"Stronger than... H-His Highness...? It can't be..."

"I heard that Gilbert took Latrielle by surprise but fought Jerome on equal terms. I've gone up against all three of them, and I'd say Latrielle is at his strongest when he has a sword, Gilbert when there's enough space for him to swing his trident around, and Jerome when on horseback. Under what circumstances would you excel, Sir Benjamin?"

"Urk..."

Latrielle was infamous for his swordsmanship. Regis had only seen it once before, but in that instance, Altina was one-sidedly pushed back. Though it was worth taking into consideration that she was emotional at the time, and their short battle transpired in a reasonably confined space.

Such details aside, the three men were all warriors whose martial prowess was known across the continent. As someone who hailed from a military house, Benjamin had most likely trained with a sword and spear from an early age, but the comparison was hardly a fair one. He must have realized that by now, as a greasy sweat had formed

on his brow.

"*Ahem.*" Regis cleared his throat. "As members of the same army, we're all comrades in arms here. We still don't have a grasp on High Britannia's movements, so at least for now, cooperation and the division of labor are more important than competing for superiority."

"Y-Yes! The tactician is right!" Benjamin exclaimed, fervently nodding as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. "There is no time for us to snarl at one another!"

"Hmph..." Upon seeing that his opponent had lost the will to fight, Jerome slouched back into his chair. Altina, meanwhile, looked somewhat disappointed; that display was probably enough for her to realize that Benjamin had simply been putting up a false front.

"Let's at least try to negotiate with Gilbert," she said. "We need as many strong allies as we can get."

Regis nodded along in agreement. "You're right."

He presumed there wouldn't be any further engagements for the foreseeable future, but there was no telling what might happen. High Britannia's invasion had come out of nowhere, and he hadn't expected that the Empire would suffer such major losses. They were no doubt better off with stronger allies, but only insofar as the budget allowed.

Altina did not own territory. Members of the royal family were customarily backed by their mothers, but her mother was a commoner whose only assets amounted to a house in Cinq Jouel, a town near the capital. What's more, the Fourth Army's budget hadn't changed from the time it was the Beilschmidt border regiment. The funds provided by the Ministry of Military Affairs weren't even enough to cover their thirteen thousand troops, so there was no possible way they could scrape together enough to hire the strongest mercenary brigade in the lands.

Our only option would be to ransom Gilbert's subordinates against him and then hire him with that same money.

"Oh, right..." Regis continued. "The Mercenary King's sisters Franziska and Jessica are nowhere to be found. It seems they've run away."

Altina's expression went stiff. It was because of the crossbow-wielding Franziska toying with her during a nighttime raid that the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* had ended up so badly damaged. Her guard knight Eric had also been shot in the process.

"I see..." she muttered. "So she's alive."

"She might come to rescue her brother."

"She did sound pretty fond of him. We'll need to be extra wary at night."

"Right. I'll put more soldiers on watch."

From there, Regis continued his report on the Fourth Army's

affairs. To summarize, they were short on both funds and non-combat personnel, two problems they would need to deal with upon returning to the capital.

Once the meeting was over, Altina triumphantly rose to her feet. “Well, let’s get to it, then!” she declared.

“Er, to what, exactly? We’ll be continuing our march shortly.”

“What we were just talking about! We’re going to see Gilbert. We’ll convince him to work for us!”

“Excuse me?! Princess, there’s no need for you to handle something like that personally!”

“I’m not doing it because I have to. I’m doing it because I *want* to.”



The prisoners were bundled together, their hands and necks bound with rope, numbering around fifteen hundred in total. A further three thousand High Britannian soldiers had been killed on the battlefield, with the rest presumably having run away. The thick fog allowed for many deserters—close to five thousand at that—and Belgaria would need to mobilize their army to track them down.

Renard Pendu had attacked a five-thousand-strong military headquarters with just three hundred men, half of whom were killed in battle. The other half were captured, but as they were too strong to leave alone even when unarmed, they were placed under conspicuously heavier bindings and subjected to three times the usual amount of surveillance.

Mercenary King Gilbert was the only one chained up elsewhere. As the leader of a defeated unit, there was a risk that he might be killed by the soldiers of the victorious army, or on the contrary, coerce those soldiers into joining him. For that reason, he needed to be isolated.

Jerome had gone back to his men, saying that he had no interest in negotiations, while Clarisse had returned to her maid work. Benjamin was not accompanying them either, since conversing with a captured mercenary was deemed a disgraceful deed for a high noble: nobles ordinarily only spoke with captives when those captives were also nobles themselves.

When all was said and done, Regis and Altina were alone when they made their way to the tent where Gilbert was being kept.

“Altina, I don’t really have anything against talking to him, but... he is a mercenary. I’m pretty sure any negotiations will ultimately come down to money, which we don’t have.”

There was no one else around, so Regis spoke to the princess in his usual, more casual tone. For once in quite some time, they were

not preparing for another battle—that thought alone was enough to bring a smile to his face.

Altina didn't appear to be so on edge either. "I know that, but he's going to be hanged if we can't recruit him, right?"

"...There's no way around it. We can't let someone so dangerous go free."

"That doesn't sound like a proper negotiation to me. I want him to become my subordinate by choice, not just because he wants to save his own neck."

"Yeah... I do have some thoughts on the matter."

Gaining the Mercenary King's loyalty would no doubt be a formidable task.

When they arrived at the tent, the guards hurriedly dropped to their knees in reverence. "P-Princess?! What brings you to a place like this?"

The soldiers were understandably surprised: it was unprecedented for a member of royalty to visit a captured mercenary, even one as notorious as the Mercenary King himself. But Altina didn't seem to mind in the slightest.

"I wish to speak to Gilbert. Could you let me through?"

"B-But... He's a—"

"What? Does my birth prevent me from speaking to a mercenary?"

"By no means! We'll bring him out at once!"

"No need. I can just go inside."

With that, she pushed aside the cloth door and entered the tent. It was dim inside. Only a few days had passed since the Mercenary King's capture, but the air reeked of a beast. He was bound to a thick pillar with metal chains, wrapped around his body several times over as though he were some ravenous animal. As his battle wounds were left untreated, blackened blood stained parts of the metal.

His eyes immediately pierced through them. Regis could feel an icy chill run down his spine, such that he might have turned tail and ran had he been alone.

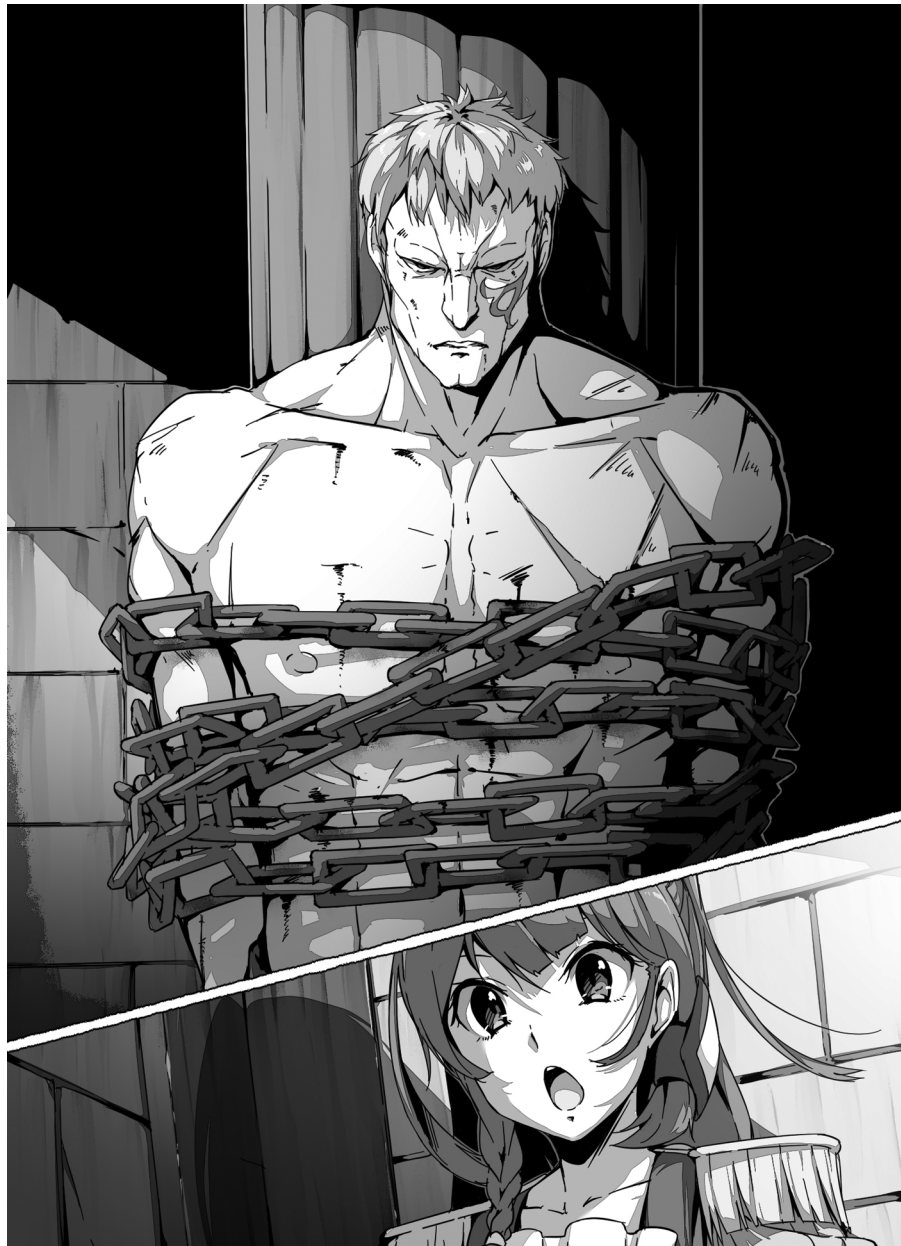
Altina placed a hand on her hip and stuck out her chest. "Glad to see you're looking well, Gilbert!"

Nothing but silence.

"I'll make this brief," she continued. "Do you want to work for me?"

Gilbert squinted in bemusement, then parted his cracked lips to speak.

"Kill me."



“Hm? You sure gave up easily.”

“Captured mercenaries are... hanged. I am aware of that.”

He didn't seem open to negotiations in the slightest.

“The princess has taken to your martial prowess,” Regis weighed in. “Have you ever considered enlisting in the imperial army? You'll receive a regular wage, and I can ensure the lives of your men.”

Gilbert's previously unmoving expression visibly twisted at that remark. “I had heard the strategist Regis d'Aurick was a dangerous man. They even called him a wizard. But he sounds more like a monster to me.”

“Eh?!”

Altina furrowed her brow. “He has a point, Regis. I don't know what to think about using hostages against him like that.”

“You too?!” Regis exclaimed. “It's well within our rights to demand ransoms for prisoners of war. We're just requesting military service in exchange, and—”

“You can't say he'll truly become my ally under those conditions though, can you?”

“Oh, c'mon...”

Regis couldn't see any conceivable way for them to become real allies—after all, they had been fighting to the death just four days prior. Altina, however, was serious.

“I remember your declaration, Gilbert. That your mercenary troupe is your country.”

“...What about it?”

“You said you would protect them. If those words are true, then lend me a hand. I'm going to become empress. And when I do, I promise to recognize your country.”

“What...?”

The chains binding Gilbert began to jar and grate.

Regis frantically scrutinized her proposal in his head. *You could have at least consulted me in advance*, he thought. But knowing Altina, there was a chance she had come up with this on the spot.

She would not only grant him land but recognize a mercenary brigade as a nation. Was that truly possible? There was nothing stopping her, legally speaking—the law meant nothing once she became empress. Not to mention, she had made a similar promise before.

“Are you taking a similar approach to our deal with Bargenheim...?” Regis muttered.

Altina nodded. “Yes, I took inspiration from that idea. Once I become empress, I intend to fulfill my promise to Diethardt, recognizing Bargenheim as a nation on equal standing with the

Empire. If Gilbert chooses to make a country himself, I will recognize that as well.”

That was, indeed, the greatest reward she could offer him; no matter how much money a mercenary amassed, they could never form a country. But Gilbert shook his head in response.

“You’re lying. There’s no way a Belgarian royal would ever honor a promise made to a mere mercenary. Not that I know who this Diethardt man is.”

“He’s a barbarian.”

“What?! Enough of this nonsense! Your kind would never honor a promise to a barbarian! In fact, you Belgarians hang any barbarians or mercenaries you can get your hands on. Do you take me for some fool who’d just blindly leap at whatever bait you put before me?!”

“Well, aren’t you a rude one!” Altina remarked. “I’m not going to honor my promises? What makes you so sure about that?!”

“...I can tell. I see right through you,” he sneered. “Belgaria is rotten. Second Prince Latrielle is going to become the next emperor. Until then, you intend to dangle your implausible ascension to the throne in front of me, working me to death all the while.”

Altina closed in on him. “I’m not joking! I *am* going to become empress! No matter what trials I must overcome, I *will* change the Empire!”

“Pay me as much lip service as you want. Your words are empty, imperial.”

“Hmph. You’re a weaker man than I thought. I was expecting a response on par with ‘I’ll take your head the moment you betray those words.’”

“What...?” Gilbert’s eyes widened in shock.

“Right now, I have neither the funds nor the land to give you—only these promises that you don’t believe in. But I *will* recognize your country once I become empress. I’m asking you to risk your life for me, so it’s only natural that I put my own on the line as well. If you think that I’ve gone against my word, come and cut me down, why don’t you?”

“Are you even sane, Princess...?”

“Who knows?” she shot back, placing a hand on her hip. “But I despise lies.”

Gilbert fell silent, his beastly eyes betraying a glimmer of intellect. He was considering the proposal carefully.

“...You’ll free my men?”

Regis stepped in to answer. “If you promise to serve under the princess, proclaim so before them. We’ll hire anyone who wants to follow you, and release all those who don’t. With their wounds treated, of course.”

“And if I refuse... we’ll all be hanged?”

“Had we lost, would you have sent us all home unharmed?”

“We would have ransomed you.”

“Of course. Barbarians and mercenaries are hanged because there is no one who will pay the ransom for them. The services of the Mercenary King and Renard Pendu, however, are worth just as much to us.”

“...That is, assuming I take you at your word,” Gilbert said with a glare.

I’ve gotten pretty used to being intimidated, Regis thought. Not long ago, his knees might have given out right about now. But here he was, still standing there—albeit just barely managing to hold eye contact.

The beastly air that had presided up to a moment ago was now gone. Gilbert was appraising them both, and by the look of things, it would actually be possible to persuade him.

But then there was a sudden ruckus outside the tent—a voice.

“Report! A report from the capital! Urgent news!”

The announcement came with such force that it sounded as though the speaker were close to coughing up blood. Regis swallowed his breath.

“Enter!” Altina called, her expression stiff.

A soldier in light armor rushed into the tent, kneeling before them. “Pardon my intrusion! This is an emergency, so if you would overlook my—”

Regis recognized his face: this man was one of the scouts he had sent to check on the capital. Judging by how feeble his breath was, it was easy to imagine something had gone awry.

“Let’s hear it,” Altina said with a nod.

“In the early hours of the 6th, His Majesty the Emperor drew his last breath!”

The princess froze at the sudden news. She had no words. Her breath was caught in her throat. Unrest spread among the soldiers outside, and this bombshell report was immediately followed up by another.

“Second Prince Latrielle is preparing to take the throne!”

Altina’s crimson eyes stared in the direction of the capital. “That little—!”

The announcement came as far too great of a shock to Regis. His head spun as though he had just been smacked in the face.

“Pff... Gahahah! Kuahahahaha!” Gilbert broke into a fit of excessive laughter. “What now, Princess?! After all that talk about becoming empress, the second prince took the throne after all!”

Altina remained silent.

“Once your political opponent is crowned, you’ll lose your claim

to the throne, won't you? Your promise of a country has gone up in smoke... Kukukuh... It's so sad that I've just gotta laugh. What else can I do?"

Still not uttering a word, the princess tightly balled her fists.

"I don't know whether it was good planning or just dumb luck, but... the second prince really got one up on you," Gilbert continued. "You won the battle but lost the war, so to speak. Your ambitions may have been noble, but they were ultimately all for naught."

His words were laced with both ridicule and disappointment—he too had dreamed of one day forming his own nation. But Altina's eyes still gleamed like roaring flames.

"I'm not going to give up!"

"...What?"

"I started this journey alone. My maid was my only ally. From there, Regis lent me his wisdom, and the border regiment became my strength. We captured Fort Volks, and now we have an entire army behind us. Even if Latrielle does become emperor, I will continue struggling to change the Empire! I won't give up until my life burns out. And I would *never* tell anyone to just 'kill me!'"

"Continue struggling'? 'Won't give up'? You've got some bark. I'll give you that. But what can you actually do? Are you really willing to incite a civil war? I'm sure you could depend on me if so, but would your soldiers follow you into a losing campaign they never even wished for?"

Gilbert was right. Belgaria was currently exhausted from its battles against High Britannia, and the soldiers would most likely feel alienated in a civil war. They also couldn't forget that the Second Army made up a considerable portion of their forces, with Benjamin as their commander. He was in Latrielle's faction, so their hopes of any unified movements would collapse the moment she mentioned insurrection.

At this point, Regis knew that any further negotiations were pointless. "Allow me to confirm one last thing... It looks like things are going to be changing quite a bit. Do you really want to be hanged so badly?"

"Mm..."

"If you agree to work as a laborer instead, I won't take off your chains, but you also won't be executed just yet. Under the condition that you unite your men, that is."

"And you'll kill them if I decline? I know how this usually goes. You'll force us to work, then gradually pick off my men when they're so exhausted they can't even move."

"You're popular among your mercenaries; I made my proposal knowing that you could rally them. Otherwise, Renard Pendu is

simply too dangerous to use for labor.”

Without Gilbert at the lead, they would certainly be too tough to handle. The metal chains binding him let off another creaking noise.

“Hmph... You think I’m still popular after that loss? Well, whatever. I’m not lousy enough to ask you to hang my men.”

“Good. That much should suffice, for the time being at least.”

Given the new circumstances, negotiating for the Mercenary King’s subordination wouldn’t be an easy task. They would need to decide what they were going to do before they could consider borrowing his strength.

Despite her previous strong response, Altina was frozen in place, looking as though she were completely lost in the dark.

“Let’s head back for now, Princess.”

“Yes. Let’s.”

She acted resilient, yet she was surely enduring much more beneath the surface, like a delicate rose caught in a storm.



When they returned to the center tent, the documents from their previous meeting were still resting on the long table—they had gone to see Gilbert without even sparing the time to pick them up. Altina placed her hands on the table’s surface, refusing to take a seat.

“Let’s summon Jerome and the others. We need to discuss our next course of action.”

Regis was standing beside her. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?” he asked, speaking slower than usual in an earnest attempt to calm her down.

“My feelings haven’t changed in the slightest!”

She was always so straightforward, so brimming with energy. But now, she came across as simply impatient. There was no doubting that she was still shaken. Of course she was. After being suppressed since birth, she had finally found a path and was risking her life to pursue it. Now, the door to her goal was closing before her very eyes. She would probably need some time to regain her composure.

I should mix in some small talk...

“Altina, when you say that your feelings haven’t changed, do you mean you’re not intending to give up? You’ll need more than just resolve if you want people to side with you. The key is to give precise orders.”

“How precise?”

“The people involved, the time, the place, the means, and the objective—it is your duty to decide on them all and then give the command. You can summon Jerome and the others if you need more information to make your decision, but not if you’re simply at a loss.”

“Ah... Yeah. You’re right.”

Altina’s shoulders dropped as she realized that she wasn’t in the calmest state of mind. Regis attempted to make the situation a little more lighthearted before things grew too heavy.

“Sir Jerome has a short enough temper as it stands.”

“Yeah...”

“I think it’s because he thinks things through too quickly and reaches his decisions before everyone else. From his point of view, the rest of us consider things too slowly.”

“Now that you mention it, I can’t recall ever seeing him worry.”

“That’s because his personal goal is clear to him. He rarely needs to hesitate. The only thoughts that go through his mind are things like ‘What do I need to accomplish this? What can I disregard completely? What must and mustn’t I do?’”

“What is his goal, exactly?”

“He takes no issue with the Empire in its current state. He simply despises the nobles who drove him out, striving to return to the capital and get rid of them.”

“Oh, I see.”

“He’s not just thinking of a goal, though—he always considers the means as well. At least, he did until you bested him in your duel.”

A look of surprise washed over Altina’s face; Jerome had never actually explained to her what was going on. “What was he thinking before then?”

“At the time, his plan was to elevate his forces to the level where they might be able to rival even the First Army. They would become strong enough that no noble would be able to drive him away again, then he would make his triumphant return to the capital.”

Regis hadn’t heard this from the man himself, of course, but rather had discerned it while sorting through their budget. It was evident that Jerome’s goal was his return, and strengthening his forces was his means. He was zealous in his training and preparations even now, so perhaps he still clung to those ambitions, having followed Altina this far because he knew that his own desires would also be met if she became empress. Who was to say what would happen now?

“I see. Is that also why he wanted you?”

Ah, right. I’d forgotten about that... When Regis had assisted with the bandit subjugation after being stationed at Fort Sierck, Jerome demanded that he become his subordinate instead of Altina’s. Even now, Regis didn’t believe he was worthy of such a position.

“Well, the fact that he’ll ‘use even trash, so long as it has some value’ probably goes to show how determined he is to advance his plans. His goal and means are clear—he knows his standard of values and can make a decision at the drop of a denier.”

“I’m putting in a lot of thought too, though.”

“Yes, but you’re looking much further into the future. That’s not a bad thing—in fact, it’s a fine quality for a ruler. Normal people can barely even manage it.”

“But it’s not enough. Is that what you’re saying?”

“...Yeah. You also need to think about what you have to do *now*. An idealistic view of the future is no more than a dream. You might say that a goal is only tangible once you find the means to obtain it.”

“Right...”

The emperor was dead, and Altina’s political opponent was preparing to take the throne. In such a situation, what should she set her sights on, and what actions should she take? She furrowed her brow, pausing in thought for a moment before opening her mouth again to speak.

“I... want war to disappear from the Empire. I kept thinking it when I saw our battles against High Britannia. No matter how strong the soldiers are, that day will come eventually—the day when we lose. We can’t just keep fighting against our neighbors. We need to cooperate with them.”

“Yeah.”

It seemed the princess had regained her composure. Given the circumstances, it wouldn’t have been strange for her to completely lose her way and grow desperate, but she was positive by nature and could seemingly never be discouraged. Regis took to this quite favorably. He wanted to do whatever he could to give direction to Altina’s dream, making it into a feasible goal once more. Up to that point, her means had been to climb the ranks until she was next in line for the throne, but that thread had now been severed.

“The Empire is exhausted. Our losses in this war have been a severe blow, and these harsh circumstances have drawn on for much too long...” Regis mused aloud, trying to put his thoughts in order. “Even though there were only small skirmishes two generations ago, the previous emperor Vicente nonetheless invested too much money into the arts and invited too many failures on the military front. Under Liam XV, ceremonies have become even more extravagant than they were before, and we’ve been involved in countless large-scale wars. The people are wrung dry by heavy taxation. Their workers are conscripted into the army, and at times, their villages and fields become sites of combat. They’ve been forced into unforgiving lives indeed...”

The Seventh Army had a conscripted farmer called Dukas—a man who had previously begged them to protect his home. Had he died in the war, who would care for his wife and children? And who would tend to the farmland he left behind? Strength was needed to plow the

earth, and there was nothing to gain from it without the proper care.

Altina nodded with a serious expression. "There are villages who can't pay their taxes."

"There's a tax for owning farmland, but there is no harvest without workers. It's not just the conscriptions that are the issue here—sometimes the crops become diseased or die as the result of poor weather. Those who can't pay are punished, so some even flee during the night out of terror."

"Are you saying they abandon their fields?"

"Without yields, they have no worth. Of course you would cast aside a field that you can't work but still need to pay for."

"Can't they make a case to lessen their taxes?"

"If a conscript dies in battle, there's a system in place where the taxes on their land are reduced, but even that's hardly enough. Being too lenient can prove just as problematic, too, since you'll end up with people who refuse to pay entirely. Not all farmers are saints."

"Ah... I see your point."

"And if you don't collect enough in taxes to maintain the military, the surrounding nations will destroy us."

"But I don't think all the tax money goes to protecting the nation."

"The reason nobles levy such heavy taxes on the people in their territories is to support their own lavish lifestyles, which are ultimately the result of gratuitous habits. I don't know how they convince themselves they can stand over others like that..." Regis said with a sigh, shaking his head in opposition. But their conversation had gone off track; freedom and equality could wait for another day.

"What should I do? My goal is to change the Empire—to rid it of war, stop the rampant exploitation, and make its people happy. I was sure that becoming empress was my only means to do that."

She was right—becoming empress *was* her only means. But that was no longer possible. Regis would need more information to understand the exact situation, but there was certainly no mistaking that the emperor was dead. In which case, Latrielle would succeed him as next in line to the throne.

"Let's hope Latrielle shares your views..."

"He told me war is necessary!"

"Yes, but that was before we fought against High Britannia. The knights who were the Empire's strength were rendered powerless before our enemy's latest guns. Surely he understands that now."

We can fight and win—that was the basis for Latrielle's policy. But with so many of his trained knights having fallen to farmhands with guns, the military would need to be fundamentally restructured. They would need to change their approach.

Altina tilted her head. "You mean he might rethink how he does

things?”

“I can’t say what conclusion he’s reached, but he’d have to be a fool to have not changed in the slightest.”

“Latrielle’s the worst, but he’s no fool.”

“He was also conscious of decreasing the nobles’ expenses and restructuring the national budget. You have that in common.”

“Well, yes... He’s the worst, but I can work with him so long as he says that he’ll do away with the wars. Marriage and whatnot is still out of the question, though!” she exclaimed, her cheeks puffed out.

Regis gave a bitter smile. It was a mystery to him why the princess was so against it, but for now, what mattered was her policy going forward.

“Latrielle previously considered war to be the Empire’s main industry,” he began, “but we’ve entered the era of guns. Battles are fought much more differently than ever before. We stand to lose far more than we stand to gain.”

“We have to avoid that no matter what.”

“Yes, pulling back the war fronts is inevitable. If you can find common ground there too, then you might not have to fight against Latrielle at all.”

Altina seemed a little hesitant. “You... may be right. When is Latrielle’s coronation going to be?”

“It definitely won’t be before the funeral. But he has already staked his claim, so I imagine he’ll probably be the main speaker at the address.”

The High Britannian Army was still on imperial territory, so hastening his coronation to avoid a lack of leadership during wartime was a logical move. There were no issues with this as far as Belgarian tradition was concerned, either: Latrielle was next in line to the throne and had managed to drive back the enemy as marshal general, earning him a good reputation among the people.

While he had lost a few noble backers during the commemoration ceremony in April, everyone would obey him once he was crowned. The position of emperor was not chosen by the nobles nor the people—it was an absolute authority passed down through inheritance.

He might have already been crowned... Regis mused, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it aloud. After all, it was nothing more than a possibility.

“We don’t have enough information,” he said, shaking his head. “Let’s wait for the follow-up report.”

“Hm...”

“Altina?”

Her head was cast down. She gritted her teeth and wiped the corners of her eyes.

“Kh... I... I haven’t... given up... but...”

There was nothing Regis could say. He could only watch as, with trembling shoulders and tightly clenched fists, the princess narrowly squeezed out a faint murmur.

“I wasn’t good enough... was I...?”

What can I do...?

This situation wasn’t in any of Regis’s books; the most he could do was look on as Altina did her best to hold back her tears. He had always known this day would come eventually—the day when his knowledge wasn’t enough, where he was powerless before a situation he knew nothing about. But now that it was actually here, it was like there was a crushing weight pressing against his chest.

...Failed. I failed.

He knew their path was laden with trials, but when he was so harshly faced with the truth, he couldn’t manage to surmount it. The reality began to dawn on him, and it felt as though his stomach was sinking deeper and deeper into a vat of molten lead.

A dull ache spread up through his nose. He had intended to shine a light on Altina’s path, to show her the way forward... but the gates were cruelly shut tight. Was there truly nothing he could do? Perhaps negotiating with Latrielle might offer more advantageous terms. Weren’t there any more assertive moves he could take for her to continue striving to become empress?

I was too passive. I never should have been satisfied with her being second in line.

He hadn’t taken any measures to corner Latrielle, even after promising to ensure that Altina became empress. What kind of a strategist was he? He had gone in with no plan at all. In fact, he had merely sat and waited for the inevitable.

Considering the emperor’s old age, I should have made every second count. Why didn’t I act sooner?!

The answer was obvious: he wasn’t confident enough. That was why he had only ever dealt with the situations immediately before him, never taking any assertive measures. He had only gotten rid of problems, never actually advancing beyond them. Altina being second in line was a huge problem in itself, but he feared what it meant to get rid of Latrielle.

In the end, this defeat was down to his own cowardice. His indolence. His lack of awareness.

Regis gripped the lapels of his uniform. “I’m sorry...” he uttered, his voice quavering.

Altina kept her head down. “Is it over?”

“Those with inheritance rights lose them the moment a new emperor is enthroned. It’s a tradition put in place to prevent civil

war.”

There were no laws for the royal family in Belgaria—they were an existence that could not be tied down by anyone. Even when it came to succession, there were no clearly stipulated regulations, only traditions that spanned several generations. But that was what made Latrielle’s looming coronation so tough to overturn. Once he took the throne, Altina would lose her claim. And even if the new emperor died afterward, she would never become empress.

Altina raised her fist... “Even so!” ...then slammed her knuckles against the table with a painful *bang*. “I will *never* give up on changing this nation!”

“Altina...”

“That is my goal. Becoming empress was just my means, right?”

“...Right.”

Incredible... Regis thought. He recalled what she had said to Gilbert.

“I started this journey alone. My maid was my only ally.”

When they’d first met, Altina held nothing but the Empire’s treasured sword. She was a commander in name alone—a woman with no authority. But she had boldly challenged the hero Jerome, drawn wisdom from a coward like Regis, and completed orders that were thought to be impossible, all to reach her current position.

There was no denying that one door had closed, but they hadn’t the time to sit around lamenting it. At the very least, Altina was ready to move again. Regis would need to find their new path, and this time, he wouldn’t fail.

With that thought in mind, Regis made a vow. “I... More than the failures of my powerlessness, I fear my own cowardice. But no matter how ignorant and helpless I am, or how much I may fear failure, each time I refuse to act goes against my promise to aid your cause. Wherever, whenever, I must use every ounce of the knowledge at my disposal and keep pressing forward. No matter how uncertain I am. Though I suppose it’s a little too late for all this...”

Altina shook her head. “It’s not too late. We may have lost to Latrielle, but I think that’s because we were lacking something. No matter how terrible the situation is, though—no matter how much we lose, and how painful it might be—it all starts here! I’ll continue striving toward my goal with everything I have. That’s the only way I know how to live... and the only way I want to!”

It was as though the crimson in her eyes had grown even more radiant. Altina was right—it was never too late. She was always looking ahead, and every passing moment was an opportunity for a new start. Even if she were alone, even if she lost her weapon, even if nobody would lend her their wisdom, she would surely never stop in

her tracks. She had forged her own path, doing what she thought necessary.

I only pray that I can be a proper guide to her this time.

“Altina... do you still believe in me?”

“Of course! I might not be able to become empress anymore, but I can’t toss away my desire to change this country. I refuse to be a piece in Latrielle’s chess game! Regis, I’ll need you around for a while to come.”

And with that, she held out her right hand, which Regis firmly took in his.

“Thank you. I’ll never betray your trust again.”

Altina smiled, her eyes bleary. “My strategist is the best. I sincerely believe that.”



Regis didn't want to disappoint her again. In his chest, something that had been frozen all this time finally began to stir...



Regis and Altina took their seats to begin discussing what would come next.

"First, we need to look into Prince Latrielle," Regis proposed. "As I said, based on his policies, you might be better off cooperating with him."

"Right. Let's go see him at once!"

"Certainly not. You can't act too hastily. If we discover that he's still intending to expand the territory, we won't be in the best situation."

"It'd be a whole lot easier if we could settle this with our swords."

"Altina... do you want a repeat of what happened on the balcony?"

"Gn... I'm not a child anymore. I won't do that again. I know I'm at a disadvantage in narrow spaces!"

"Is that really the problem here?!"

Altina chuckled at the sudden outburst. "Come on, Regis. I was only kidding."

"Well, I think you understand my point."

"Now that you mention it, though—even if we did meet Latrielle, he'd just say whatever convenient things I wanted to hear. That's the sort of person he is."

"We need to keep our distance until we're certain we know his intentions. If Latrielle does take the throne, you'll need to act as his vassal. But if you can't sympathize with his ideals, we should avoid forming a clear pecking order."

"Right. I'm never going to call that guy 'His Majesty,'" she said, puffing out her cheeks.

Regis offered a wry smile. "Do you hate the prince for political reasons? Or is it because of your childhood?"

"I don't completely hate him—he's my brother, after all. But I can't stand that he's a liar. He always lies to make things convenient for him."

"...By that logic, wouldn't you hate me too?"

"Well, you trick people, but you don't lie."

"Hm? Is that so...?"

He hadn't been aware that this was the impression he gave her. But there were more important things to consider. For now, he decided to send some trustworthy people to the capital to gather information.

That night—

The follow-up report arrived. Liam XV was indeed dead. There was no doubt about it. By the testimony of the grand chamberlain, he had passed away peacefully in his sleep, entrusting the future of the Empire to Latrielle. And as expected, Latrielle proclaimed his succession to the throne. He received a warm welcome from the public since High Britannia was still moving through Belgarian territory.

As the war had yet to settle, Liam XV's funeral was an informal one. A national funeral would be held at a later date. Latrielle's official coronation was being postponed along with it, so while he was already conducting himself as the emperor, he had yet to officially take the position and had made no announcements concerning his policies.

One thing was certain, however: the Empire was falling into Latrielle's hands.

Chapter 2: The Milky Way

June 9th—

Regis glanced out the window. It wasn't until the sun hung directly overhead that their destination finally peeked out from beyond the hills: Fort Boneire, a stronghold of ashen walls.

The grassy green plains bore the scars of an intense battle—the earth was bestrewn with hoofprints, dotted here and there by small craters where cannon shells had landed. There were no bodies, though. Corpses risked causing epidemics once they started to rot, so men and horses alike were given a prompt burial after any battle.

Soldiers often carried a rather substantial amount of money on their persons. There were times when they would need to make purchases even while serving in the military, and should they ever be forced to desert, whatever they had on hand would ultimately become their lifeline.

It was naturally considered a vile deed to loot corpses, but the lowest-ranking soldiers tasked with disposing of the bodies were given no more than a meager reward for their services, so this was a valuable opportunity for them to earn their bread. This practice was strictly limited to enemy corpses, however, since the belongings of allied soldiers were sent back to their families as mementos. Looting from fellow Belgarians who had courageously fallen in battle was considered an even heavier crime than stealing from the living, and it was severely discouraged by the church.

A mere half-day's walk from the capital, Fort Boneire truly was the Empire's last line of defense. But as it came fully into view, it became clear that its ramparts had been completely devastated—what had once been a massive gate was now little more than a large pile of rubble, almost as though it had been struck by a giant's hammer. A great many soldiers were in the process of removing the remaining stones by hand.

The fortress itself wasn't too old, and its stone gate had surely been sturdy enough; it was hard to imagine it could collapse on its own, yet even a volley of cannonballs wouldn't have caused this much damage.

What happened here...?

The sight caused an anxious murmur to spread among the Fourth Army's soldiers, who soon slowed their march. Altina joined them in

her confusion, tilting her head from atop her trusty steed, Caracarla.

“What on earth could have done that?” she mused aloud.

As Altina led her horse closer, Regis leaned out the carriage window for a better look. “This is incredible...” he muttered.

“Hey, Regis. What do you think?”

“Hm... Gunpowder. But I’m intrigued as to how they managed to ignite so much so close to the gate.”

“Looks like Latrielle had a tough fight too.”

“With the fortress in a state like this, he was incredibly lucky that it wasn’t captured.”

“Do you think it’s all right for us to approach?”

“I’ve already heard back from the scouts. We shouldn’t drop our guard, of course, but I don’t think there’s any need for us to be particularly wary.”

“Gotcha!” Altina said with a nod, delivering a light kick to her horse’s flank. Caracarla promptly picked up the pace, leading her to the front of the march, and with the princess at the lead, her hesitant ranks of troops gained a second wind that carried them forward.

Once collected, the stone pieces that had made up the front gate would be placed in baskets, then transported far away from the fortress to be discarded. The soldiers carrying out this demolition work waved as they spotted the Fourth Army, raising cheers and jubilantly waving flags. The wind carried the tune of cheerful war songs.

Soon enough, Regis arrived at the fortress. He turned to Clarisse, who was sitting in the carriage alongside him. “You should probably wait in here for a little while longer.”

“Very well,” she responded in her usual gentle tone. “Take care.”

Regis alighted from the carriage and made his way over to Altina. She was already speaking with the commanding officer, who just so happened to be a familiar young knight.

“I’m delighted to have the opportunity to speak with you again, Princess!” the man said warmly.

“Why, if it isn’t Coignière!” Altina exclaimed, a broad smile spread across her face. “You certainly look lively!”

As it turned out, the Seventh Army were the ones removing the rubble, and they were currently under Coignière’s command. He had belittled the Beilschmidt border regiment once upon a time, yet his attitude had changed so dramatically since then that he almost seemed like a whole new person. His men seemed to be delighting in this reunion as well, temporarily pausing from their work to cheer even louder as Regis approached.

“Splendid work, Tactician!” Coignière beamed, meeting him with a crisp salute.

“Oh, err... thank you.”

Regis frantically saluted back, having never expected the focus to turn to him. The last time they had seen one another, Coignière was a second-grade combat officer, and there was a chance that his rank had risen even higher now that he had taken up a position of command. Given that Regis was at least one rank below him, he should have been the one to salute first.

“Long live the strategist, Regis d’Aurick!” cheered the Seventh Army.

Regis felt as though he might faint at any moment. With their defeat in the war for succession still fresh in his mind, these words of praise seemed so out of place. He had to wonder whether this was all just a dream.

As the tactician stood frozen on the spot, Altina gave him a firm pat on the back. “What are you spacing out for?” she asked. “Say something!”

“Wha—? Me?!”

“Do you see any other Regis d’Auricks around here?”

“No, but... Have I really done anything to deserve this?”

The princess gave a wry smile. “Good grief, just how Regis can one man be...?”

“You really haven’t changed one bit,” Coignière said with a chuckle. “Admiral Bertram’s report has already become the talk of the army.”

“His report...?” Regis couldn’t seem to comprehend.

“Indeed! It was written that when the admiral sustained a serious injury, you took command in his place. Not only did you manage to outmaneuver the Queen’s Navy, but you were also able to capture one of the enemy’s latest ships and even take their commander prisoner!”

“That... That was only possible thanks to the excellence of the Empire’s navy. Sure, plans that involve diving into the sea at night aren’t too uncommon in certain books, but I’ve come to realize just how dangerous doing that actually is.”

It seemed that Coignière wasn’t dissuaded in the slightest by these excuses. “Is it true that you sunk a ship with a single burst of dazzling flame?!” he asked, his face lit up like a young boy hearing a grand fairy tale. His men were similarly listening in intrigue.

“Right, yes...” Regis found himself shrinking back inadvertently; he didn’t dare say that the admiral’s report was a lie, especially considering that it wasn’t necessarily inaccurate to begin with. “We lost a few allied ships in turn, though.”

“Aah! How gripping!”

The clamor only continued to spread.

By nature, Regis grew sick to his stomach whenever he received a

compliment—a disposition that soldiers who saw military achievements as things to be proud of could not begin to understand. Coignière in particular went on and on.

“I also heard that you defeated the Mercenary King’s army of ten thousand with an ingenious scheme!”

“It was the princess who defeated the Mercenary King...”

“Why, they even say that you created fog! Is that actually possible?!”

“I did propose something to that effect, though it was the sapper Ferdinand who made it a reality. Of course, the soldiers also worked hard to—”

Before he could even finish his sentence, the Seventh Army’s soldiers were astir once again. A number of surprised exclamations could be heard coming from among their ranks.

“He *made* fog?!”

“He really is a wizard!”

“Wouldn’t wanna get on his bad side!”

Their reactions were of course warranted, since hardly anyone studied natural sciences in their day and age. Learning what caused rainfall or why rainbows formed would neither keep someone safe in battle nor put food on their table.

It was no surprise that they couldn’t quite grasp the concept of artificially generated fog or how Regis had managed to put it to use in a real combat situation. What they could understand, however, was that he had rendered High Britannia’s latest firearms powerless—the very same firearms that had devastated the Seventh Army during the Battle of La Frenge.

The soldiers’ wonder seemed to grow exponentially, and the more praise they heaped onto Regis, the sicker he became. He couldn’t see any logic in it; some things simply made him feel queasy.

In a desperate bid for escapism, he attempted to change the topic. “Incidentally... what happened to the gate? This looks like the aftermath of a gunpowder explosion.”

“How did you know?!”

“I can’t say exactly how it happened, but... a gate like that doesn’t just crumble on its own.”

“You’re right about that. The truth is...”

Coignière went on to detail the enemy’s scheme. Someone had been hiding inside a seized barrel of gunpowder, blowing himself up just as it was passing through the gate.

Regis knitted his eyebrows in a deep frown. “What sort of a plan is that...? To die if you succeed...”

High Britannia’s strategist was a man by the name of Oswald. By some accounts, he was essentially acting as their commander too.

Altina was visibly enraged. "He ordered a soldier to commit suicide?!" she yelled. "What a disgraceful man!"

"Right..." Regis said with a nod.

He was standing before rows of soldiers and didn't want to be misunderstood, so he refrained from voicing his true thoughts aloud, but... he didn't find Oswald's plan to be particularly vile. Between ordering an army to charge into grave danger and putting a select few people on a suicide mission, which was truly worse? Was the former really so noble and the latter so wrong? Why was it that sending one man to their death made someone a criminal, while sending ten thousand to the very same fate made them a hero?

There were no laws that would formally incriminate Oswald, but his deeds in this war would most likely come back to bite him eventually. Perhaps they would be mentioned when the war ended and conditions for a peace treaty were being decided, or maybe the Empire would simply invade in turn. It was ultimately up to Latrielle. Putting aside whether or not he actually took the throne, he still had command over the military; once war began, it was entirely up to him when and where it ended.

Coignière gave a deep sigh. "I suffered a minor injury during the battle right before the explosion, so I had ventured to the infirmary at the back of the fortress. I escaped danger as a result, but Lieutenant General Buxerou of the Third Army and his Sun Knights weren't quite so lucky..."

"I see..."

Regis closed his eyes, offering the fallen men a moment of silence. Something wasn't sitting right with him, though. The enemy vanguard had marched toward the fortress and then fled, leaving their cannons and gunpowder behind. It should have been an obvious enough trap, especially since they knew their foe had such a competent commander. And yet, they took the bait as eagerly as fish in a pond.

Latrielle had made substantial gains in past wars, and Regis had no complaints about his credentials, yet it felt as though he had been somewhat... *negligent* this time around. He had approached this battle much too simply and was nowhere near scrutinous enough. Had his subordinates perhaps acted of their own volition?

That said, even if Regis had been there himself, he couldn't imagine that things would have gone much differently. Had he said something along the lines of, "*I don't know what their plan is, but it's probably a trap,*" his peers would have almost certainly laughed and simply labeled him a coward. Such was unfortunately the norm, so his proposals would most likely have fallen on deaf ears.

"Has the second prince returned to Verseilles?" Regis asked.

Coignière nodded. "Yes. High Britannia may have backed off, but

there's a chance they could take a detour and once again attempt to attack the capital."

"Hm... And how has the High Britannian Army moved since their retreat?"

"We do have people tailing them, but they haven't come back to us with intel yet."

"I see."

Just to be safe, Regis pressed Coignière further on their patrols and their contact with the capital.

"Are we going to camp outside?" Altina asked. "Or should we stay in the fort?"

"If the Seventh Army are the only ones still stationed here, there should be enough space for us both. Let's enter through the south gate and borrow some rooms."

Altina relayed this to the troops. They all sounded delighted to be sleeping with a roof over their heads after spending so long out in the open.

Regis glanced over at the rubble. "Did Latrielle order you to remove that?"

"He did. Fort Boneire is the cornerstone of the capital's defenses, so we'll need to repair it as soon as we can... but at this rate, it might take a month just to clear the rocks away. Are we truly going to be all right?"

"If we had an enemy other than High Britannia deep in imperial territory right now, then we might have had cause for concern. But in our current position, I don't think we have to worry about that."

"Hm..."

"Is something bothering you?"

"On the off chance that High Britannia *does* return, the Seventh Army alone won't be enough to hold them back. Our losses at La Frengé were considerable, and we suffered even more casualties while defending this fort. We don't even have ten thousand men left, and our soldiers are all worn out."

"Indeed... If they do return, please abandon the fortress."

"Wait, what?!"

"You won't be able to protect it like this, which means you'll essentially be handing it over either way. Simply falling back shouldn't be an issue."

"Ah... I see."

"Even if the enemy decided to barricade themselves in, they have no supplies, so they'd be forced to surrender eventually. I'm sure they wouldn't make such a stupid decision in the first place, though, so you don't have to worry about them coming back."

"You... have a point, Tactician." Coignière narrowed his eyes

slightly, then lowered his voice to a murmur. "If you had been by the prince's side, I can't help but wonder if we could have beaten High Britannia here as well."

Regis gave a weak laugh, then shrugged. "In all honesty... I doubt it."

As the two men conversed, the Empire's Fourth Army entered the fortress.



The setting sun dyed the former battlefield in hues of red—a breathtaking sight, but one that was somberly reminiscent of the recent bloodshed.

From the north, a party appeared waving the flag of the Empire: a two-horse carriage surrounded by horsemen on all sides. It was an envoy from the capital.

While the Seventh Army had been tasked with protecting Fort Boneire, Altina was still the highest-ranking officer present. Protocol dictated that she should be the one to welcome the messenger, and while some commanders would leave such a task to their subordinates, she was not one of them.

Regis was lying on his bed as still as a corpse, buried in a book, when there was a loud knock on his door. He had received a summons to join the princess in a meeting.

He was led to the conference room by one of Coignièra's subordinates. It was a vast space, looking out across both the front entrance (which was now no more than rubble) and the southern plains. The window itself was broken too, having most likely fallen apart when the explosion great enough to destroy the gate had rocked the entire fortress.

Altina was already there when they arrived, sitting at the long table. There were a few others too, but the envoy was nowhere to be seen.

Regis respectfully lowered his head. "Sorry for my lateness."

Coignièra rose from his seat. "No need to apologize, Tactician. Please, over here," he said, urging him toward the seat beside Altina.

Regis shrunk back again, taking a curious look around once he was seated. There was cloth draped across the walls, small intricate ornamentations were placed here and there despite it being a structure intended for war, and the ceiling boasted an extravagant painting of God and his messengers. This was all customary for fortresses in Belgaria; it truly was a nation that aspired to greatness in both art and combat.

Waiting in the room, from the farthest back to those nearest the door, were Altina, Regis, Benjamin, Justin, and Coignièra.

Is that everyone...?

“Where is Sir Jerome?”

“Tending to his horse, apparently.”

“How scrupulous of him...”

“Indeed.”

Altina’s lips were bent into a harsh frown; Jerome presumably found meeting the envoy to be too much of a pain. Regis would need to report the important details to him later on.

“This is where General Latrielle took command,” Coignière commented, attempting to fill the silence. “He looked down over the enemy army from that window.”

“He oversaw the battle from there?” Regis asked cautiously.

“Yes. I was present when he was discussing the enemy formation with his adjutant, Germain.”

“I heard that he was injured. How has he been lately?”

“He did call a doctor to his room on several occasions, but he was prepared to lead the charge at the very end of the battle, so I believe he is in good health.”

“Is that so?”

Regis had noticed that Latrielle was acting somewhat strangely the last time they saw one another. It had been weighing on his mind, but perhaps the prince truly wasn’t suffering from any lingering health concerns.

At that moment, a soldier called out from beyond the door. “The envoy from the capital has arrived!”

Coignière exchanged a look with Altina, then gave his response. “Let them in.”

“Yes, sir!”

The door opened, and in stepped a robed woman accompanied by four cavalymen in light armor. She had dark hair that reached her hips, long eyelashes, and tightly pursed lips. Her firmly set features gave her an air of majestic beauty, while the way she held herself made her seem like an intellectual of sorts. She was perhaps around the same age as Regis, and met those waiting in the conference room with a bow.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Fanrine Veronica de Tirasio Laverde of the Ministry of Military Affairs.”

Her family name was immediately recognizable.

“Tirasio Laverde? Are you Elenore’s younger sister?” Altina asked, tilting her head to one side.

“Yes, my sister is greatly indebted to you,” Fanrine replied, her smile so elegant that there could be no denying she was the daughter of a prestigious house. “It is an honor to finally meet you under these circumstances.”

“Why are you working with the Ministry? House Tirasos Laverde is a ducal house with a booming business in the south, right?”

Officials of the Ministry were technically counted as soldiers, but they never went into battle themselves, instead spending a great majority of their time working in government offices. Such positions mainly existed so that noble children who weren't skilled with a weapon could still gain military titles, making them similar to inspectors in some regard. As those in the Ministry never saw combat, it was even possible for women to find employment among its ranks—though this was still incredibly rare.

Fanrine pondered the princess's question. “Are you asking why I entered the Ministry? Let me see... Unlike my sister, I had no interest in running a business. I've never been very good with numbers, you see.”

“Wait, doesn't the Ministry deal with numbers?!”

“Oh, I suppose you're right... How peculiar,” she replied with a refined giggle.

Fanrine was evidently quite an elusive woman. The confidence with which she spoke before someone who was both an imperial princess and commander of the Fourth Army was perhaps something she had inherited from her sister.

Regis urged her on. “I was under the impression that officials such as yourself rarely left the Ministry. Why have you come here?”

“I am here because I need to be here. First of all, please take this.”

She held out a letter to Altina. The imprint on the wax seal suggested that it was a directive from the Ministry of Military Affairs, which was confirmed to be the case when the princess opened it up and read the paper inside.

Soldiers from all over the Germanian Federation are gathering in Varden.

There is a risk that Fort Volks may be recaptured. The Fourth Army shall march to its defense.

Altina leaped up so suddenly that her chair flew back behind her. “This is an emergency!” she yelled.

The others in the room wore stiff expressions. Even Fanrine seemed surprised; the envoy was oftentimes not informed of the contents of their message, especially when they were officials rather than messengers.

“May I see it?” Regis asked, pinching the letter and bringing it up to his face. This normally would have been an incredibly ill-mannered thing for him to do, but Altina didn't seem at all bothered. In any case, he couldn't make any recommendations without first knowing

the details.

He scanned the page.

“Mhm... I see... Looks like there was a report from our spies in Germania.”

Regis firmly believed that he needed his own information network, and while he was currently working to establish it, their lack of both funding and manpower had made it a rather slow process.

“Regis!” Altina exclaimed, wildly flailing her arms about. “This is no time to act so casually!”

“It’s all right. There’s a chance that they might attack, yes, but they’re still in the preparatory stages. What matters right now is that our soldiers are exhausted, so we should set off the day after tomorrow at the earliest. Before anything else, though—please take a seat, Princess.”

“R-Right.” She picked up her toppled chair and settled back into it.

“Hm, there’s more information here too... It’s about the east.”

“Oh, really?” Coignière leaned over in interest.

Regis read aloud from the paper before handing it over.

“Relations with Estaburg to the east are expected to decline. The Empire’s Seventh Army should watch for signs of any further movements.”

“Does that mean abandoning our defenses here? Have they unequivocally determined that High Britannia is retreating?”

Regis nodded. “Their forces have headed north toward Germania. They haven’t yet left imperial territory, but... the Ministry seems to believe the First Army will be enough to take care of them.”

“Will they really be okay? The northern front is under the Third Army’s jurisdiction, but Lieutenant General Buxerou and his Sun Knights passed just the other day. They’ll need to reorganize.”

“Our northern defenses have indeed thinned out...”

The Second and Third Armies had seen considerable losses during their battles against High Britannia, leaving large gaps in their war fronts. There were reserve forces that could be sent to compensate for this, but the question was how best to use them.

Coignière carefully scrutinized the letter. “Mn... Why would our relationship with Estaburg worsen? I understand there were hostilities between us for many years, but didn’t we take a consort of theirs just last winter as a sign of peace?”

As far as Belgaria was concerned, the kingdom of Estaburg was just a minor power. But it had eagerly been expanding its territory as of late, swallowing up the surrounding nations to expand its war potential. Even with these developments, however, its king was due to turn fifty that year, and their momentum was quite evidently on the

decline.

As tensions mounted with Germania and High Britannia, Belgaria did not want to invest too many troops on the eastern front, and to this end, they had welcomed Princess Juhaprecia Octovia into the palace back in February as a show of unity. Now, however, the Ministry anticipated a worsening of relations, enough that they deemed it necessary to leave the capital unprotected.

Regis cocked his head. "Even with His Majesty's death, not even half a year has passed since we brought Estaburg into the Belgarian royal family. I don't see a particular reason why they would want to declare war. High Britannia is retreating as we speak..."

A few potential explanations did come to mind, but Regis thought it best to simply ask someone who already knew the circumstances. He turned to Fanrine.

"May I ask why you foresee worsening relations?"

She faltered for a moment before giving a reluctant answer. "It is because... Consort Juhaprecia has also passed away."

"What?!"

Regis jumped to his feet in shock, Altina was at a complete loss for words, and Coigniera looked around with wide eyes. Even Fanrine silently cast her gaze down.

"Upon learning of His Majesty's death," she eventually continued, "she took her own life out of grief."

"That's absurd..." Regis inadvertently muttered.

Something about that didn't sit right with him. It was true that the emperor's death meant Juhaprecia would have lost her standing in the imperial court, but she still would have lived in ample luxury. There was no reason for her to kill herself.

"Took her own life out of grief?" Altina repeated, a deep crease running along her brow. "That woman's not the sort to do something like that."

That might not have been the most appropriate way to phrase it, but Regis agreed with the observation. While he had only briefly seen Juhaprecia during the commemoration festival, the way she had conducted herself certainly didn't make her seem like the type to follow the emperor to the grave. He could not deny the possibility that she was a completely different person outside the public eye, but the events just seemed too unnatural.

"Do you know exactly how she took her own life?" Regis asked Fanrine.

"It is a tragic tale... She plunged a fruit knife into her own chest."

Regis grimaced. That couldn't have been true. Altina didn't seem to have accepted it either.

"Something's strange, don't you think?" she asked. "For one, they

keep saying that my father died of old age, but he was perfectly fine the last time I saw him. He was certainly eating more than his share of meat.”

“It definitely is strange...” Regis murmured in agreement.

“Things just don’t make sense.”

In the midst of their exchange, Benjamin suddenly interjected. “I do hope that I’m mistaken, but... you don’t suspect Prince Latrielle, do you?”

“I never said that,” Regis replied, attempting to smooth over the situation. But Altina immediately undermined his efforts.

“I mean, it doesn’t add up, no matter how you look at it!” she said.

Benjamin shook his head. “I believe in His Highness. That man is always thinking about the Empire’s future. He would never do something so terrible for his own gain.”

“I’m not so convinced,” Altina shot back. “I can’t believe in him. Back when I asked whether he poisoned Auguste, he wouldn’t give me a clear answer.”

“E-Excuse me?!”

“I can’t say that he gave the order or even intended for it to happen, but... there are people who want Latrielle to become emperor. They lurk in the shadows like venomous serpents, waiting for their chance to strike,” she said. Her voice seemed to exude more frustration than anger.

Benjamin wiped the sweat from his brow. “His Highness would never do something like this, though. Not for any selfish reason...”

Sure enough, Latrielle didn’t seem like someone who would act for personal gain; he was a true leader with the courage and sense of responsibility to leap into danger for the good of the Empire. And that was precisely why Regis suspected him.

“He could have done it for the sake of the Empire,” he suggested.

“Wha—?!”

Outwardly proposing that Latrielle had slain the emperor out of concern for the nation was insolent to no end, and so Regis had made sure to choose his words carefully.

Altina shrugged. “I don’t doubt that he’s worried about the Empire in his own way, and there are few things he wouldn’t do to secure his place on the throne. Does one instance in particular not come to mind, Sir Benjamin?”

“Whatever could you be referring to...?”

“I seem to recall someone kidnapping a silver-haired maid from Felicia’s mansion.”

“Erk?! Th-That’s...”

Soon after First Prince Auguste had succumbed to poison, his

younger sister Felicia began to impersonate him, directed by her mother Second Consort Catherine, who just so happened to be a former actor. A maid with similar silver hair then began to impersonate Felicia in turn, feigning illness so that she could remain in Duke Touranne's mansion.

That had all started close to a year ago.

During the festival to commemorate the founding of the nation, Latrielle had dragged the aforementioned maid to the capital as a means of cornering Auguste. More specifically, it was Benjamin and the Second Army who had barged into the duke's estate to capture her.

Altina shrugged. "I don't have much to say on that matter—not at this point. But Latrielle has proven how far he'd go. That's why I have my doubts about him."

"Urk... Mh... Ghh..."

Benjamin promptly shut his mouth. Voicing these thoughts was fine for someone like Altina, since she herself was royalty, but a mere marquis like him expressing such doubts might be considered *lèse-majesté*. Fanrine looked surprised but similarly kept silent.

Regis decided to step in. "Regardless of what we think on the matter, Prince Latrielle will surely be wary. He should be well aware how much suspicion this situation places on him. Furthermore, while Juhaprecia did not look like the sort to kill herself... there is no way we can really know for sure. We were no better than strangers to her, so I can't say anything for certain."

Benjamin nodded. "You're right..."

"There are of course a few points of concern, but we're only going off of rumors at the moment. We should rein in the army so that doubts aren't cast purely based on speculation."

And thus, the topic concluded on an entirely different note from how it had begun. The word "suspicious" was quite an understatement when it came to Juhaprecia's suicide, but Regis had no way of dealing with it now.

I've already made some moves, but those aren't enough...

He had chosen a few soldiers who seemed to have a knack for gathering intel and sent them ahead, but it quickly became clear that they weren't specialists—they had proven unable to deal with this sudden development and ultimately failed to bring back any results. As such, Regis had yet to receive any usable reports. In fact, this was the first time he was hearing about Juhaprecia's death.

The Empire's official spies belonged to the Ministry of Military Affairs, meaning they were now Latrielle's subordinates, although most high nobles would surely have their own personal spy networks as well. It would be near impossible to spread a surveillance net over

the capital at this point in time.

Should I really let him take the initiative again...? This is a tough call. I'm at a complete loss.

Given the situation, it was already too late for Regis to make the optimal move. He knew that. And unlike before, he couldn't just deal with the problems thrust at him. Nothing would change unless he actively made a move himself.

Perhaps a little recklessness was in order.

There was a sudden knock at the conference room door, and in came the maid Clarisse with a deep bow. As per usual, she was like a different woman entirely: monotone and expressionless.

"It is time for dinner. What arrangements shall I make?"

"It's already that late?" Altina asked. "Could you have them bring it here? Officer Fanrine, you're welcome to join us."

"Oh my! Thank you. It's quite the honor," Fanrine responded, bending her knees slightly in a noble bow.

With that, Clarisse swiftly exited the room. It wasn't long at all before a large platter laden with food was brought in.

The table was lined with ham, sausage, boiled potatoes, and pickled cabbage, as well as warm soup, soft bread, and even honey. Their food supplies had only just come in, so the meal was more extravagant than usual.

With their dinner taking up all the space on the table, Regis resorted to spreading his maps out on the wall—one showing Fort Volks, and the other showing Estaburg to the east.

"Err... Estaburg is small compared to Belgaria, but it does have a considerable influence over the eastern regions. Their aim, I presume, was to have Consort Juhaprecia bear a son with crimson hair and red eyes, then prop him up as the next emperor. They were striving to swallow the Empire whole."

Such a development wasn't particularly rare: consorts were essentially no better than political hostages, and in the case that a child they bore took the throne, their home territory would receive preferential treatment. It had happened a number of times over Belgaria's lengthy history.

Regis brought everyone's attention to the other map.

"Fort Volks was notoriously impregnable, so I can't imagine it'll be very easy to breach in the case of another attack. We currently have two thousand men defending it, and the Fourth Army totals thirteen thousand. That gives us fifteen thousand soldiers overall... which is perhaps too much for us to manage."

Assuming the High Britannian Army had indeed retreated, it was relatively safe to say that the capital was no longer in immediate danger. The noble armies who had only joined on a temporary basis to

help with the war effort would soon return to their territories, but with these troops totaling less than a thousand, their departure wouldn't have all that big of an impact on Belgaria's military capacity.

Altina furrowed her brow. "While I'd love to have Fort Volks so well protected, it troubles me knowing how weak our defenses are on the other war fronts."

"It's precisely as you say. There's the budget to consider as well, which is a problem in itself. Returning to the issue of the east, though..."

Altina and Benjamin both began piling food onto their plates. Steam rose up from the meat and potatoes, accompanied by a delicious aroma that slowly spread through the room. After a bit of encouragement, Fanrine started eating as well.

Coignière joined in as well, though he was still attentively listening to Regis's explanation. When the focus moved on to where he and his men were due to be deployed, he stopped eating entirely, giving the tactician his full attention.

"With all the hills and deep forests in those parts," Regis began, "using horsemen would simply be impossible. The imperial army specializes in head-on collisions between massive armies, while Estaburg excels at surprise attacks using smaller numbers, so they'll prove quite the formidable opponents if we allow them to hide among the trees and snipe our men with arrows."

Coignière looked surprised. "Tactician, have you ever been stationed in the east?"

"No, I've only read the reports stored in the capital. If anything I say is inaccurate, please do speak up and tell me."

"You've been right so far. But why would you have read those reports if you weren't being stationed there?"

"Eh? Well, because I had access to them. I've read the contents of every shelf available to commoner administrative officers."

"I-I see! And why is that?" Coignière asked. It seemed there was no limit to his astonishment.

Regis scratched his head. "Let's put that matter aside for the time being... I believe there are five thousand troops still garrisoned on the eastern border. Is that accurate? If so, how are they organized?"

"That number is correct, yes, but the majority are old soldiers and new recruits—those who we deemed unable to keep up with the expedition."

"So those forces aren't quite as strong as the figure suggests."

"Correct."

"How is the Seventh Army faring at the moment?"

Coignière produced a folded sheet of paper from his waist pocket. "Ahem... We originally totaled twenty-one thousand. That number

dropped to ten thousand during the Battle of La Frenge, and then decreased even further to eight thousand while we were defending Fort Boneire.”

“You lost that many in a defensive battle...?”

“Injuries aren’t our only concern; we’re losing an increasing number of men to illness...”

“I see. The war certainly has drawn on.”

“Most cases were brought on by fatigue or open wounds, but... there was a problem with our supplies too. We didn’t receive as much food as we ordered, and some was rotten when it arrived.”

“That sounds terrible...”

“And since the amount sent by the Ministry wasn’t enough, we had to put in orders from the nearby towns. But...” Coigniera trailed off, his expression turning bitter. It seemed he’d certainly had his share of problems.

Altina cocked her head. “That’s never happened to us though, right? Why’s that?”

“Supplies from the Ministry are often partially embezzled along the way,” Regis explained. “That’s why I always send soldiers to where the goods are coming from. They check the supplies every morning and every night, taking care to ensure that everything is accounted for.”

“Since when have you been doing that?!”

It wasn’t just Altina—everyone seemed surprised. Regis had assumed the practice was common enough knowledge, given that it was featured in several of his books, but this apparently wasn’t the case.

Coigniera had merely been a knight until recently, when the death of his superior officer saw him thrust into the position of commander. Benjamin and the Second Army, meanwhile, were normally charged with defending the capital; they rarely ever went on expeditions such as these. Perhaps these two men hadn’t even considered that someone would be so self-centered as to embezzle supplies during a war in which the Empire’s very existence was on the line.

Regis sighed. “To threaten so many lives for slight personal gain... Such foolish crimes often stem not from a lack of conscience, but rather from a lack of foresight. The embezzlers cannot fathom that one simple act might cause rampant starvation and illness among the troops on the front line, in turn bringing about the collapse of the Empire when we cannot maintain our defenses. As unfortunate as it is, their reasoning is shallow at best: they act simply because nobody is watching them.”

“Grr...” Coigniera groaned in frustration.

The greater the ramifications of an action, the harder they were to

imagine. Everyone knew that killing a person to steal their money was a crime and that such a heinous act would require the perpetrator to be quite the villain. For an embezzler, however, it hardly even registered that ten thousand would go hungry and thousands would die.

It was similar to a builder taking careless shortcuts or a higher-up putting someone into an authoritative position based on favoritism alone: one hardly stopped to think about the potential consequences. Those who lacked the imagination to have such foresight could at times be far more terrifying than even the vilest of criminals.

Regis decided to bring the discussion back on topic. “Before this war,” he began, “the eastern front was supported by around twenty-six thousand soldiers. At present, the Seventh Army is only around thirteen thousand strong. I’m sure we could use some trickery to mask the gaps, but there’s a limit even to that.”

“We’ve put in a request to the Ministry for reinforcements...”

“Quite a few units were depleted in combat this time around, so that might take some time. On that note, I would like to make my own proposal—how about we send a portion of the Fourth Army to support you? I’ll need to look into the specifics a little more, but I believe we should be able to spare six thousand.”

Coigniera rose from his seat. “I couldn’t ask for more!”

Regis next looked at Benjamin. “I’m thinking of using the former Second Army as the core of our eastern support unit. There will, of course, be some officers from the former Beilschmidt border regiment going along with you.”

“...That sounds appropriate,” Benjamin replied with a nod.

At present, those who had served under the Beilschmidt border regiment and those who had served under the Second Army had zero coordination with one another; when they eventually met up with the other troops at the fortress, it would take quite some time for them to get acclimated. Regis intended to dispatch some competent officers to accompany them, training the two groups so that they would be more cooperative the next time they joined together.

There was also the fact that Benjamin was a noble in Latrielle’s faction—he would probably feel more at ease supporting the Seventh Army than accompanying Altina. Deep down, he surely wanted to return to the second prince in the capital, but he could not ignore a direct order from the Ministry.

It went without saying that gaining full control of the Second Army’s troops was an optimal move, but it wasn’t so simple to sway the human heart. Carelessly placing even a single inadequate person in charge would inevitably invite a revolt from the soldiers.

In any case, Regis was in need of capable officers. They needed to

be experienced, popular, able to understand orders, and adaptable enough to cope with sudden changes. Above all else, however, they needed to be loyal. There was a chance they would one day have to confront Latrielle, the soon-to-be emperor, so it was crucial that they gather people who would follow Altina, even if doing so meant being branded as traitors.

Regis checked the map. "We'll work out the details later. I'm sure the soldiers are tired from all the fighting and marching they've had to endure; we'll allow them to rest today and tomorrow, with the aim of departing the day after."

"That sounds good to me!" Altina exclaimed, nodding in agreement.

Coignièra, who was still standing up, met both Regis and Altina with a crisp salute. "I'm grateful for your assistance! The Beilschmidt border regiment saved us in the Battle of La Frenge as well... I shall never forget this debt. Please, if there's anything that I can help you with, just say the word."

Altina rose to her feet as well. "Thank you. I'll be counting on that," she said, holding out her right hand toward Coignièra.

"But of course!"

Thus, the two shook hands. Regis hadn't intended for it, but it seemed a cooperative relationship had been formed with the Seventh Army.

Coignièra looked over at the tactician with a smile. "If we must face a formidable foe like High Britannia again, I would love for it to be under your command."

"Ah, I'm afraid not," he protested. "The princess is our commander; she's the one who will take charge."

Altina placed a hand on Regis's shoulder. "Oh, what does it matter? Everyone knows that you're the one thinking up the plans here!"

"No, that's..."

Regis was pleased that Altina trusted him, but he worried about her becoming too dependent on her martial prowess as a commander.

When the discussion was over, all thoughts turned to reorganizing the battalions and preparing for the return to Fort Volks. It was precisely at this moment that Fanrine—who had up to that point been silently eating at the foot of the table—raised her hand.

"Might I say something?" she asked.

Altina nodded. "Go ahead."

"I did not come here solely to deliver that one decree..." she said, producing a second note. "Could you please read this?"

She was holding it out to none other than Regis.

"Is this addressed to me...?"

“Yes. It’s a letter from my department.”

“From the Ministry... to me...?”

Regis had a terrible feeling about this.



It was a summons from both the Ministry of Nobility and the Ministry of Military Affairs, singling out a certain “Regis Aurick.” What’s more, it demanded his immediate attendance.

“Th-This is...”

It was rather strongly worded.

Altina peeked over his shoulder, read the letter through, then slammed her hand against the table. “But we’re supposed to return to Fort Volks immediately! There’s no way we can answer these summons!”

Faced with the princess’s stern glare, Fanrine apologetically lowered her head. “My apologies. I fear it might not have reached you, but Sir Aurick was also meant to have received a summons last February. This directive has essentially gone ignored for almost half a year now.”

“Can you blame us?” Altina retorted. “Just how many battlefields do you think we’ve been dragged between since then?!”

“I do understand, but... it is because of those achievements that they wish to discuss an adequate reward. Before that can happen, though, Sir Aurick must be promoted to third-grade and issued the rank of chevalier. Otherwise, he will surely encounter a number of problems henceforth.”

“Surely none of those problems are great enough to warrant pulling a strategist from the front lines!”

“Mn... I am just a lowly official, so I can only relay the words of Minister Berard, but... ‘How could we possibly recognize a third-grade admin officer as strategist of the Fourth Army?’ is what he said...”

“Recognize?! What does that even mean?! Whether the minister *recognizes* him or not, Regis’s plans are what protected the capital. Don’t tell me he thinks you can fight a war with titles!”

“Eep... I’m sorry,” Fanrine squeaked, pulling back slightly.

“Now, now...” Regis interjected, trying to deescalate the situation. “There’s no use taking it out on her.”

“I-I know!”

“I still haven’t received my official notice, so as far as the Ministries are concerned, I’m still a fifth-grade administrative officer. I doubt they’ll sympathize with any reason you give as to why someone of such a lowly rank cannot be removed from the battlefield.”

The current situation aside, Regis did somewhat understand their position.

Fanrine nodded. "Soldiers are obligated to listen to orders from the Ministry of Military Affairs, and the Ministry of Nobility has been chasing us about your attendance for some time now. They seem rather irritated that they haven't received a response in this long..."

"It's hardly been the time for something like that..." Regis said with a sigh. He had sent a written report explaining his situation, but it seemed they had not deemed it necessary to warrant an exception.

"I'm very sorry," Fanrine continued. "The Ministry of Nobility has been giving us quite an earful, asking why we are incapable of monitoring our own soldiers, or whether you are a liberalist... I believe you can infer the rest. They have been coming around every week."

"Oh, I see... I suppose the title of chevalier is supposed to be the goal of every commoner; under normal circumstances, I should have dropped everything to answer them. Having someone ignore them for this long must be insulting to no end."

"Ignoring a summons from the Ministry of Military Affairs, however, is a more serious matter. That would constitute a blatant breach of orders."

"Perhaps, but—"

"I know about the circumstances, of course: the summons did not reach you on the outermost border. That is all in the past now. The reason I have been dispatched is to ensure that this does not happen again—that the message does indeed reach you. I was told to bring you back with me, no matter what it takes."

"I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"Oh, I am simply glad to have gotten the opportunity to meet you. But unless you comply, your standing will only decline from here. Please... won't you answer the Ministry's summons?"

Regis folded his arms, deep in thought. Based on what he knew so far, there was a high chance that Fort Volks would once again be attacked. And even though they had a larger army at their disposal now, their forces weren't sufficiently coordinated; having more troops simply made them harder to use effectively.

Is it really all right for me to leave them?

"Can the promotion and the conferment be dealt with by filling out a few forms at the capital? I wouldn't want to stay for any longer than a few days."

"Unfortunately, the Ministry of Nobility's procedures will take some time. Even though your title will not be hereditary, the point still stands that a commoner is becoming a noble. There are many things they will need you to remember, plus there are quite a few formalities involved."

"How long might this take, exactly?"

"I presume somewhere between a week and a month."

"That's quite a while..."

As always, the work of government officers was so fastidiously ceremonious that efficiency was no longer even a consideration.

"On top of your promotion paperwork, the Ministry of Military Affairs will also need you to take an exam on military regulations, since a commissioned officer has separate duties from a non-commissioned one. Those will also take some time to learn."

"That's not very encouraging... Can I just turn down the promotion?"

Fanrine's eyes widened. "Please reconsider."

Ignoring the initial summons was evidently serious enough to have warranted sending an official, and now, outwardly declining it would be considered a breach of orders. It was urgent enough that noncompliance might even have Regis labeled a traitor. The reality was that this promotion was not some optional reward, but rather a mandatory decree; much like a demotion, he had no say in the matter.

"Well, I suppose I could just quit the military..."

"Ah, I do remember hearing that my sister solicited you. Would you become a merchant, perhaps?"

"That's not exactly what I had in mind..."

Altina smacked the table again. "Regis! You can't do that!"

"Don't worry, Princess. I'm not becoming a merchant."

What Regis had meant was quitting the military to accompany the Fourth Army. He couldn't imagine it would cause any issues with the soldiers of the former border regiment; they recognized Altina as their commander, and Jerome served as their unifying force, so they would presumably still accept his proposals whether he was a soldier or not.

But what about the new recruits? It wouldn't be easy to earn their trust, and no plan could succeed without the trust of all its participants.

"In any case, I will *not* accept this!" Altina declared, shaking her head in refusal.

"Still..." Fanrine had a troubled look on her face.

"Regis is currently fulfilling an important duty, and recalling him would put the army at a massive disadvantage! Don't think I haven't read up on military regulations. As a commander, I have some say over my subordinates' actions, and it's within my rights to submit a formal objection!"

"Yes, but... as High Britannia retreated so recently, the Ministry believes there is a low risk of any further hostilities in the near future. Your objection will most certainly be dismissed."

"This is needless harassment!" Altina exclaimed, clenching her fists. She seemed to be having a hard time accepting this. "Those at

the Ministry have never been to the front lines! What do they know?! A low risk of any further hostilities, they say? Did they believe there was a high risk before High Britannia invaded? How many soldiers died because the Ministry failed to predict the war? Because they made light of the enemy's Sniders and steam engines?"

It was the duty of the Ministry of Military Affairs to gather intel. Had they learned that High Britannia was readying its forces, or gained some valuable information on the latest guns and steam engines, perhaps the Belgarian Army would have approached its battles differently.

After seeing so many dead bodies, Altina was understandably reluctant to concede. She was beautiful enough to have warranted sonnets from minstrels, but once angered, she was more intimidating than a ravenous wolf. Even seasoned soldiers would have faltered in her presence.

But right now, Fanrine exuded nothing but calm. "This summons is for the sake of Sir Aurick's future," she said, speaking in a soothing voice. "It is by no means a bad deal."

"Urk..." Altina was at a sudden loss for words.

Regis personally had no interest in the promotion or the conferment: his main priority was fixing his mistakes that had allowed Latrielle to make such a decisive move. Altina becoming empress was no longer a realistic goal, but what else could she do to change the Empire? Regis wanted to help her find that new path.

Altina eventually gave in, seeming to understand that it wasn't her place to deny Regis his promotion or his title. "You're right... Regis has achieved more than enough to deserve this," she said, slumping her shoulders. "I'm sorry."

Regis scratched his head. "Let's think about this calmly."

"Yeah," she feebly nodded.

Regis directed his next question at Fanrine. "Officer Tiraso Laverde, might we have some time to discuss the matter?"

"Fufu... I would not want others to confuse me for Elenore. Please, Sir Aurick—call me Fanrine."

"Really? Then you can call me Regis."

"How delightful. I shall gladly oblige. I am afraid that we cannot afford you too much time, but a few days should be doable."

"Thank you. I'll have my reply by tomorrow."

Fanrine nodded, a soft smile on her lips. "Very well, Regis."



Late that night—

Sitting in the room he had been provided, Regis was hard at work, bathed in the flickering light of his oil lamp. His desk was covered with tall stacks of paper, as was his bed; he had unloaded so many documents from his carriage that he was surprised to have somehow found space for them all.

By now, Regis had already organized which soldiers would be heading to Fort Volks and which ones would be supporting the eastern front. He would need to leave any further fine-tuning to the officers stationed on-site.

With those arrangements made, he turned his attention to his own future. His quill raced across a sheet of paper as he tried to consider the situation from as many angles as possible.

“Yes... That seems like my only option.”

He reached out and grabbed the nearby oil lamp—an expensive piece that Altina had prepared for him. It was shaped like a teapot, and it was able to be carried around while lit thanks to its brass handle. Regis had previously used candles, but this alternative was a considerable deal brighter. It made doing paperwork quite a bit easier and alleviated the struggle of walking the halls at night.

Altina’s room wasn’t too far away. It was just at the end of the hall.

As Regis made his way over, the two sentries on night watch saluted him. “Tactician,” one said in a hushed voice, “the princess is probably asleep.”

“Oh, right. It’s already midnight. That’s troublesome. There are forms I need filled out by tomorrow morning... and I need her approval...”

Regis stood frozen in place, unsure what to do, while the two sentries exchanged a glance. It was then that they heard a small metallic *click*—the sound of a lock being unlatched. The door leading into Altina’s room cracked open just a slither, enough for a small trickle of candlelight to leak through. There was no silhouette, only a voice.

“Regis...?”

“Yes, sorry. I didn’t mean to visit you so late.”

Regis and the sentries hadn’t been speaking loud enough to wake her. In fact, the light coming from the room probably meant that she had already been awake, most likely waiting for him.

Altina spoke again, her door still not open enough for those outside to see her. “You’re welcome to wake me up whenever you need me. I wouldn’t like to think I’m an incompetent enough commander to turn away my strategist just because it’s nighttime.”

“A strategist who needs to wake his commander at the dead of night is probably the incompetent one...”

The princess giggled. “Then I’m counting on our conversation being worth the loss of sleep.”

“Ah... Maybe it’s best we wait until tomorrow, then.”

“Regis.”

“Hah. I’m only kidding. If you’ll pardon my intrusion...”

Regis nodded to the sentries as he walked past them, and they straightened their backs and saluted in response. He placed his hand on the doorknob, stepped inside, and then closed the door behind him.

Altina’s room was vast. Paintings adorned the walls, and the curtains were embellished with splendid embroidery. Standing in the glow of the candlelight was the princess herself, dressed in her white sleepwear—a silk gown minimally decorated with lace and ribbon. It was vaguely translucent, showing the gentle curves of her body.

“W-Wah?!” Regis inadvertently shuffled back.

Altina shushed him. “No strange noises. The sentries might get the wrong idea.”

The room was reasonably soundproof, but those stationed outside would still be able to hear them if they spoke too loudly.

“What... What are you wearing...?” Regis asked. He tried to cover his eyes, though he could still see through the gaps between his fingers.

“What else were you expecting? I was just about to go to sleep. It’s not like I can go to bed in a corset. I’d rather sleep in my armor.”

“Should I... come back in the morning?”

“Is my attire really that important to you? Turn around, then. I’ll get changed.”

“Sorry, but we’re short on time. You can stay like that. As long as that’s okay with you, that is.”

“It’s only a problem if you make it one!” Altina boldly declared, placing her hands on her hips. The red tinge to her cheeks seemed to suggest otherwise, though.

So she really is embarrassed... Regis thought. He kept that to himself, though; he hadn’t come here to see her in a nightgown, and he certainly didn’t intend to make it the topic of their conversation.

“It’s about what we were discussing over dinner...”

“Right. How do you plan to reply to the Ministry?”

“Firstly... what do *you* want me to do?”

“I can’t imagine you being away from the unit for an entire month. Even if we aren’t drawn into any battles during that time, I don’t know how we’ll manage by ourselves.”

“That’s a problem in itself...”

“Yeah... I know it’s not right to continue like this, placing such a heavy burden on you, but it’s not like we can magic up more admin officers to cover for your absence. Even if we could, it’d take them a

good while to learn your job.”

“That’s... Yes, that’s true.”

Regis certainly wasn’t against the idea of sharing his work, assuming there were others who could handle it. He had been overworking himself ever since being assigned to Fort Sierck, and the workload had only grown more intense when they relocated to Fort Volks. Back then, he had just barely been able to get by thanks to the help of a select few soldiers who knew how to read and write.

Now that the Fourth Army had over ten thousand troops in its ranks, however, the amount of paperwork had reached the point where it was completely impossible for Regis to manage alone. And while he had hoped that absorbing the Second Army would mean more assistance, they weren’t faring much better: so many of their admin officers had died or fled when they were bested by High Britannia that only a few trainees remained.

With the Fourth Army’s current numbers, they would need around a thousand administrative officers. Having less than a hundred meant they wouldn’t even have enough capacity to fill out the necessary forms for new equipment.

Regis could understand why Altina needed him around, but that only made his announcement even harder to make. There was no other option, though. He looked up with as much resolve as he could muster, meeting the princess’s gaze.

Altina’s eyes, an even deeper crimson in the orange glow of the candlelight, wavered beneath her scarlet bangs. She lurched back, placing a hand to her chest. “Huh? Are you still concerned about my nightgown? D-Don’t stare at me so intensely...”

“Ah... No... Please listen to me.”

“What?”

He wavered. In all honesty, he wasn’t sure whether the move he had decided on was the best one to make—it certainly wasn’t the safest. But if everything went well, there would be much to gain.

Regis determinedly clenched his fists, looking the princess in the eye once more.

“I think I should go to the capital alone.”

“Wha—?! ”

Altina was at a complete loss for words. Such a heavy silence fell over the room that it was as though they had both ceased breathing entirely.

“R-Regis...” she stammered, her shoulders quivering. “Are you serious?”

“I can’t stand lies, and I’m certainly no comedian.”

“You’re going to... abandon me...? And this army...?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“But, I mean, I... I can’t become empress anymore. So...”

“Wait, Altina. That’s not the reason I’m going. When I agreed to become your strategist, it wasn’t because I thought you were going to become empress.”

“Did you... Did you not think I could make it...?” she murmured weakly. Regis had never seen the princess look so utterly dejected.

He shook his head. “I made a promise that day. I’ve always believed in you. But right now, I think we need to make a realistic decision.”

Altina swallowed her breath, looking up at him. Her eyes were bleary, a few tearstains tracing her cheeks.

“Eh...?” Regis froze. A strange feeling had gripped his heart.

The princess wiped her eyes, then hurriedly turned away. She raced over to the bed and dove onto it, hunching over with her back to him and the white sheets pulled up over her head.

“Gh... Snff... Nn... Hic...”

“A-Are you crying?”

“Mh naht cryn!”

She definitely sounded like she was crying.

Regis tried to think what the protagonists from his stories would do at a time like this. Should he put a comforting arm over her shoulder? Say something tactful to dry her tears?

I... I can’t do it.

He merely slumped his shoulders. Altina was right there, trembling beneath the sheets, her breath catching with every sob, and yet he remained stock-still beside the bed.

His gaze wandered to the window—to the large moon that hung in the darkness outside and the glimmering celestial stream that spanned the night sky to form the Milky Way.

“Altina... I truly believe your wish can one day come true—that the Empire can thrive without war. Yes, the shortest route to accomplish that was for you to become empress, and I won’t deny that recent developments have made our goal harder to reach... but I haven’t fallen into despair.”

“You’re lying...” she mumbled.

“I told you, I can’t stand lies. Though I do like fiction... But please, listen to me.”

Altina didn’t react. Regis continued anyway, hoping she would hear him out.

“Latrielle isn’t just suspicious. He’s *blatantly* suspicious—that’s what bothers me the most. And there are too many things about Consort Juhaprecia’s death that just don’t sit right with me. Assuming the emperor’s assassination was indeed predetermined, what reason would there be to murder her too? As a widow, she would have lost

her political influence, no longer posing any threat to the throne. Estaburg would certainly be displeased about their plan having failed, but so long as the girl they sent us remained alive, our relationship wouldn't deteriorate enough to warrant war. To put it simply: Latrielle would have absolutely nothing to gain by killing Juhaprecia."

Altina still remained silent. Regis patiently continued nonetheless.

"With that in mind... did His Majesty truly die of old age, causing Juhaprecia to take her own life in turn? I considered the possibility that there was an accident of some kind, but I can't see that having happened either. No accident could occur in the royal palace that would result in both their deaths, and if this *had* been an accident, there would be no reason to cover one up as a suicide. If we discard the impossible, the only feasible explanation that comes to mind is... spontaneous murder."

Altina swallowed her breath. The mere suggestion that Latrielle had murdered their father was no doubt hard to hear, but Regis couldn't stop there. This matter was important for their future.

"Was inheritance the motive? Were there other emotions involved? Whatever the case, someone killed both His Majesty and Consort Juhaprecia without a plan. If we consider things that way, a few things begin to make sense. And the person responsible needs to have been influential enough to conceal the truth."

"What do you mean?" Altina finally replied, though she still wouldn't look at him.

"It requires quite a lot of authority to disguise a double murder. And at present, Latrielle is the only person with that kind of power who comes to mind."

"Then... he really did kill Father?" she asked, her voice quavering.

Regis nodded. "Juhaprecia's death was simply too bizarre. As you said, I can't imagine her being the sort to take her own life. There was no political need either. Someone killed her on impulse, and Latrielle covered it up. I can't say whether he did it himself."

When Altina finally turned around, tears were streaming down her face. It was a painful sight to see, though the moonlight streaming in through the windows and the glow of the candles made it wistfully bewitching.

The princess removed the sheet from over her head, letting it drop behind her. Her disheveled red hair colored her porcelain skin like flowing blood.

"I understand..." she said weakly. "From what you've said, it definitely sounds like Father was murdered."

Regis nodded. There was no guarantee that his conjecture was correct, but it was certainly plausible.

"Not even the royal family can avoid execution for raising a hand

against the emperor,” he said. “And if Latrielle really was involved, his time on the throne will certainly be short-lived—his position would be revoked, and he would be treated as a false emperor. It would be like his coronation never happened.”

Altina moved to the edge of the bed, lowering her feet down to the floor. She looked up at Regis, but he couldn’t quite tell what her expression was. The only things that registered to him were her teary eyes.

“Latrielle killed my father... And now, am I going to have to kill my brother?”

“A frightening thought...”

“But... is that what’s needed to change the Empire?”

“I can’t deny it. But we’re still only talking about possibilities here.”

“I see...”

With that, Altina closed her eyes. Crystal-clear drops continued to run down her face.

Regis didn’t know how to stop her tears. Perhaps his actions would cause her to shed even more. But even so—

“I’m going to the capital to discover the truth. And as I’ve told you before, Latrielle might think differently now. Should he decide to pull back the war fronts, we should support him. Even if he is a false emperor.”

“Do you... want me to marry him?”

“Of course not. Why would I want that?”

“What if he demands it?”

“Even if Latrielle does end up putting an end to the wars, you’re still the Empire’s most accomplished commander in recent years. He’s not going to do something as stupid as remove you from office. It’s pointless to even assume that.”

“Mn... You think so?”

“Say the second prince did become anti-war, though... Would you want to marry him then?”

“If you don’t want me to, Regis, then I’ll happily decline.”

“Yeah, that’s not what I want. I refuse to even consider it.”

“I see...”

Altina wiped her eyes. She wasn’t crying anymore.

“I mean, even if your political interests align, becoming his spouse is much too dangerous,” Regis began, explaining the reasoning behind his decision. “There’s a chance that he might change his policy after you’ve been married. Someone might even be able to piece things together as I have, in which case his crimes would come to light. And if that happens—*when* that happens—there’s a risk that you’ll be seen as someone who supported the emperor’s murder.”

“Of course... You’re opposed to the marriage purely for political reasons. I knew it!” Altina exclaimed, tapering her lips. When she made that face, she looked a lot younger than she actually was.

Regis sighed. “Sorry... In all honesty, though, that’s only half the reason.”

“Oh? What’s the other half?”

“It’s incredibly selfish of me, and I don’t even understand it myself, but... I have this feeling deep down that I wouldn’t want to see you become Latrielle’s wife. I’m sorry. I can’t really explain it.”

He was ashamed to be speaking so irrationally.

“M-Me too... Becoming Latrielle’s wife is just... I couldn’t do it,” Altina said, her cheeks going red. “I’m happiest when I’m speaking with you like this, Regis. And if I did become someone’s wife, we wouldn’t be able to talk like this anymore.”

“...You’d also most likely have to quit the military. We wouldn’t be commander and strategist anymore.”

But even while we are commander and strategist, we probably shouldn’t meet in your bedroom at midnight... Regis tacked on internally.

Altina shook her head. “Then it just won’t work. I wouldn’t want to have to stop talking to you.”

She rubbed her eyes, which were now welling up with tears again. They had turned red at the corners.

“As long as you’re a commander, I will continue to be your strategist. I might be away for a while, but I’ll be back as soon as I can. And I might be gathering information, but if an enemy attacks Fort Volks, I’ll run there as fast as I can. Even if that means having to quit the army.”

“...Yeah,” Altina replied. It seemed as though she had wanted to say more, but she simply gave a nod.

“I’ll be back.”

“It’s okay. I’ll prove that we can do just fine, even without you. Ah, that reminds me—you can’t do anything dangerous, okay? You’re pretty weak.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I know that better than anyone.”

“Should I send a guard with you? If only Eric were here...”

“How do you think he’s doing? Do you reckon he’s healed yet? If it weren’t for him, I probably wouldn’t even be alive right now.”

“And if you had died, Belgaria would be in serious danger. He’s the hero who saved the nation. I’ll send you a letter on how he’s doing once I’m back at the fort.”

“I can’t wait. Oh, that’s right—here, let me teach you a code.”

“A code?”

“Yes. It’s used just in case a letter is intercepted.”

Regis listed out letters and numbers on some paper, showing

Altina how they worked. The princess happily listened to his explanation.

“...Right, I should return to my room now. I’ll have all the necessary papers ready by noon tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

“Make sure you hire some more administrative officers.”

“I’ll do something about that when I’m back at the fort.”

“I’ll try bringing it up with the Ministry too. Ah, that’s another reason to go to the capital.”

The two of them exchanged a brief chuckle, then Regis made his way to the door.

“...Please take care,” he said.

“I’ll be fine! I’ve trained diligently. I’m sturdy. I have loads of comrades. I’m good at fighting with a sword and riding horses. I can handle myself, no problem!”

“You’ve certainly got a point.”

“But you, on the other hand... You *don’t* train, you’re *not* sturdy, and you won’t have *any* comrades in the capital. You can’t even swing a sword or ride a horse...”

“Hah... I’ll make sure to look after myself.”

“Yeah.”

“Goodnight, Altina.”

“See you tomorrow, Regis.”

He turned his back to her, placing a hand on the doorknob. But before he could even turn it...

Altina embraced him from behind.

“Eh?!”

“No... Please, don’t go...”



She was holding him tight. He could feel the warmth of her body, and her heart pounding anxiously against his back. Regis's own heart responded in turn, beating so hard that he worried it might suddenly break into pieces.

"A... Al... Alti...?"

He could feel everything through her thin silk negligee.

"No."

"H-Hey... Come on, now... We've just spoken about this..."

"I know... I know... You're going to the capital out of necessity. And it's crucial that you go... for both the Empire and me."

"Precisely."

"But..."

"But...?"

"Can't you at least stay here until morning? If you're sleepy, we can share the bed."

That makes it even harder for me to stay!

"Wait, wait, wait!" Regis stammered. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden?!" It went without saying that he was beyond flustered.

"I mean... it feels like I might never see you again."

"I intend to return after a month at most, so I'm not going to be away for long. You're making this a lot harder than it needs to be..."

"Will you really come back?"

"Of course."

"Really, really?"

"Such is my intention... And I'll be sure to write."

"Then I will too! I'm not very good when it comes to letters, but I'll do my best! I'll send you one every single day!"

"Every single—?! No, that's, uh... quite a lot of work..."

"Regis! If you don't send me letters back, then I won't speak to you ever again!" Altina shouted, tightening her grip around him even more. What had started as a soft embrace had now turned into the torso equivalent of a stranglehold.

"Ow, ow! Okay, okay! I'll just think of it like a daily report. Then I'm sure I could manage one a day!"

"They're not reports!"

"Letters! Yes, letters! Daily!"

"That's a promise, okay?"

"What about you? Will you be able to write one every day?"

"I'll do my best."

"I see. Well, I'm looking forward to it."

Altina loosened her grip on Regis, though she remained pressed against his back.

"Snff... Regis... Just a little more... Okay...?"

She started to sob once again, her body trembling as she struggled to choke back the tears.

Regis could do nothing but stand in place. His eyes once again wandered out the window to the night sky, crossed by the spectrum of the Milky Way.

Chapter 3: Fanrine

The next day—

There had been heavy rainfall since the early morning. Bad weather while camping out was the worst—one's body would feel chilled to the bone, and it made it even harder to secure a decent night's rest. It certainly was troublesome, and that was why Regis thanked his lucky stars they had already made it to Fort Boneire. Surely the soldiers were glad to have a roof over their heads too.

During a morning meeting, Regis informed everyone that he was headed to the capital, and that he would consequently be away from the army for more than a month.

Benjamin, Justin, and Coigniera all appeared completely unsurprised, no doubt having seen the decision as self-evident. This sentiment was widely shared among soldiers in Belgaria: a reason couldn't possibly exist for a commoner to turn down a chance to join the ranks of the nobility—after all, what more could there be to strive for?

Jerome simply clicked his tongue without a word. He was the man who had ordered Regis to return to the capital the first time they met, though perhaps he was at least a little more reluctant to part with him now.

Altina silently nodded. After their long discussion the night before, she had come to accept what needed to be done. Clarisse, meanwhile, nodded from the corner. She had returned to her silent mode and thus offered no reaction.

The soldiers were the next to be informed of Regis's leave of absence, and as expected, nobody was the least bit surprised. He had received a summons from the Ministry of Military Affairs, after all—as long as the commander didn't raise any objections, it was only natural that he would oblige. In fact, the more unexpected outcome would have been for the tactician to refuse the order or even quit the military entirely.

That said, quitting wasn't much of an option: as things were, he wouldn't be able to resign and accompany Altina as a servant without having some troops refuse to follow his plans.

That wasn't worth considering right now, though; it wasn't as though they were facing an urgent threat. Regis instead mused over the more pressing matters that had been playing on his mind ever

since hearing about the matter with the Ministry.

The things I need to do in the capital are what's most important right now...

"Next on the agenda: the reinforcements we're sending east..." Regis began.

"Weren't we sending the former Second Army?" Altina asked.

Regis scratched his head. "There were some coordination problems during our last battle. Of course, supporting the eastern front is our main priority, but... if we do not properly address these issues, I fear they will never improve. That is why I'm considering sending some officers from the Beilschmidt border regiment alongside them."

"So they'll get some training in while they're aiding the Seventh Army?"

"Precisely."

Jerome had a rather unpleasant look on his face. "You're taking troops away from me *again*. Just how long do you think it takes to train them?"

"Sorry... They're all so excellent. You certainly know how to nurture their growth, Sir Jerome."

"Hmph. I don't remember nurturing anyone. I just ordered them to do the necessary training and removed anyone who didn't listen or couldn't keep up."

"But the ones who managed to endure have become the best soldiers we have. That's more than enough. Most importantly, you've instilled into them a certain courageousness."

On the battlefield, there were few more terrifying than the Black Knight himself. It made sense that the soldiers he trained would never run away.

"Not another word from you," Jerome said, furrowing his brow. "You only flatter people like that when you're scheming."

"That's... not necessarily true."

"Who've you chosen? Which poor sap are you sending to the east?"

As apprehensive as Regis was to answer, he knew that the person he had decided on would almost certainly be the optimal choice.

"Er... The truth is... I was going to ask you, Sir Jerome."

Benjamin let out a small shriek, while Jerome simply regarded the tactician with a pitying look, as though he were gazing upon a complete fool.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"A lot of thought went into the decision, and... when I'm looking for someone who can train troops to coordinate with the border regiment, unify the soldiers of a separate battalion, and aid the

diminished eastern front..."

"What about the Fourth Army?"

"If Germania does invade, those at Fort Volks will only need to fight defensively. And with the Type-41s we seized from High Britannia, the enemy won't get the drop on them with their artillery."

Additionally, of the High Britannian soldiers they had taken as prisoners of war, a few had already turned coat. It couldn't be said whether they would go to war against their home country, but in a battle against a separate foreign power, surely they would assist for the sake of survival.

Another deciding factor for Regis was that their cavalry would find much more use on the eastern front than a defensive line, but this did not seem to sit right with Jerome.

"I heard the east was all forests and mountains," he said. "That horsemen were unusable there."

"There's certainly some truth to that... If you were to go on the offense, you would be fighting in the forests. Estaburg's soldiers are good at lying in wait, and the horsemen will already be at a disadvantage. However..."

Regis spread out a map, then suggested pulling back the defensive line to the plains since this would put them in a better position when intercepting the enemy. At each step of the explanation, he sought confirmation from Coigniera, making sure to reiterate that their battle plan would focus solely on defense.

Jerome clicked his tongue a number of times throughout. Then, when the tactician was done, he exclaimed, "You sure are barking up the wrong tree here!"

"I believe my recommendations are all very reasonable."

"You're good at what you do, Regis, but you don't have what it takes to stand above others."

"I agree."

"Hmph... From the way you've described it, this plan sounds pointless. You need to learn how to better motivate your subordinates."

"Sorry. I thought the reduction in predicted casualties would be enough..."

"You're too selfless and sensible," Jerome said with a scoff. "Those soldiers headed to the battlefield, what exactly do you think they are? You think they're decent people? They already know that people are gonna die, but they march because they believe it won't be them. It's pointless to try and convince those men by saying that your plan will cost fewer lives. Why should they care? What you need to tell them is that you'll recognize them for their distinguished service in the operation. *That's* how you raise morale. Sure, the greedy ones die first,

but that's just what it takes."

Regis hung his head. He definitely wasn't a soldier by nature. No matter how many books he read and how deeply he delved into their philosophies, he still couldn't comprehend them in the truest sense.

"I'll keep that in mind going forward..."

"Well, regardless of what the soldiers think, a stupid plan creates a mountain of corpses. I'll admit, we could do without that... Maybe it's your influence, but lately, everyone from troopers to head troopers have started prattling on about tactics with smug looks on their faces."

"Really?"

"The ones who can read are even acting like they're back in the academy, reading books and all that."

"Books, you say!"

That was quite wonderful, as far as Regis was concerned. He could feel a wave of excitement washing over him. Jerome, in contrast, was getting more and more irritated.

"Tsk... Don't look so giddy. The wiser they get, the harder they are to use!"

"Ah. Haha... I see."

Even so, upon hearing that his actions were having an impact on how the soldiers thought, driving them to turn toward the letters and books they had previously shown little to no interest in, Regis could not help but rejoice at his accomplishments.

Having spent the day getting some much-needed rest, the Empire's Fourth Army were to await a spell of good weather before returning to Fort Volks. Meanwhile, a division was set to head east with the Seventh Army.

It was not far from Fort Boneire to the capital, and the roads were well maintained, so Regis decided that he would depart despite the weather. Half a day saved would mean reuniting with the army that much quicker.

Not to mention, gathering intel was best done while the news was freshest.



Regis gazed across the yard from a doorway in the fortress's central tower, watching the gentle rainfall. To avoid making their journey any longer than necessary, they were going to use the rear gate since it already faced north. He was currently waiting for the carriage to be readied there.

Clarisse had come to see him off. "You're really going, aren't you, Mr. Regis?" she said, a lonesome hint to her voice. Perhaps because they were alone, she drew even closer than usual.

Regis naturally found their parting tough as well, but what else could he do?

“There’s something I need to take care of at the capital.”

“I see... Whatever shall we do without you...?”

“I’ve already passed on everything that I needed to. Altina should do just fine.”

“Yes, the princess will certainly be okay. She’s *my* princess, after all. But Mr. Regis, if you’re gone, how exactly am *I* supposed to go on? I might not be able to live without you...”

“Haha... You’re making far too big of a deal out of this.”

“Without anyone to tease, I might just die of boredom...”

“Wait, were you just using me to kill time?!”

“Fufu... It really is a shame that I won’t be able to enjoy your priceless reactions anymore. We’re losing such a splendid talent...”

“Hey, come now, I’m not dying here! I do have to admit, though... I’m going to miss the amazing tea you make.”

“Is that so?”

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t lie about something like that.”

“I see... So after all this time, I’m no more than a teapot to you...”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Kidding.”

“Hah... Good grief...”

Clarisse stared at him fixedly, and it was then that Regis noticed a faint blariness to her eyes.

“Please take care, Mr. Regis... Please... Rather than the princess, or the Empire, focus on your own well-being...”

“Thank you. You look after yourself too, Ms. Clarisse.”

“...I will.”

She stepped back, then deeply bowed her head.

What’s gotten into her...?

“Oh, there you are!” came a sudden voice. It was Enzo, marching over from down the corridor. “Reggie, my boy. I hear you’re going to the capital.”

“That I am. What do you plan to do, Enzo? If you want to join me, we can share the guards. Going to Rouenne would be a bit of a detour, but it’ll certainly be safer for you.”

“Yeah, about that... I still have some work to do.”

“What kind of work?”

He was a town blacksmith. It wasn’t as though he were enlisted in the military, so there was no need for him to take up any requests here.

“I understand that I’ve got no obligation to do jobs for the army, but I can’t just abandon my current projects halfway through. That armor is what’s gonna keep those men alive on the front lines! Doesn’t

help that they keep bringing me more; now I've got heaps to work through."

As a strategist, Regis was grateful for the man's unwavering sense of duty. But as a brother-in-law, he had some concerns.

"Are you going to be all right...?"

"Yeah, uh... probably not. I'm teaching the army smiths, but they only understand about half of what I've shown them so far. And if they start taking on work while they still don't fully grasp things, they're only gonna cause more problems."

"Err... Okay, I can understand that. But you're not going to accompany them all the way to Fort Volks, are you?"

"They're leaving when the weather clears up tomorrow, right? Seems like I'll need to, then. Haven't finished fine-tuning the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* yet either."

Now that he mentioned it, Enzo had indeed said that he would adjust the hilt to better fit Altina's hands.

"What about your smithy? You've got work piled up there too, haven't you?"

Enzo groaned. "Yeah, I'm worried about that too... But, well, I've told my apprentices to depend on my brothers for any jobs they can't handle themselves, so there hopefully won't be any problems."

"Wait, you have brothers?" Regis asked. From what he recalled, Enzo's only living relative was his elderly mother.

Enzo waved his hand dismissively. "You're getting the wrong idea. They ain't related to me by blood. They're my peers. We were taught under the same smithing master."

"Ah, right..."

"I've got five brothers in Rouenne, all exceptionally skilled and just as trustworthy. In fact, the town's full of people like that."

"It isn't called the city of smiths for nothing..."

"That does leave one problem, though..." Enzo murmured. His face, which had been brimming with confidence just a moment ago, started to wither like an old tree.

"Wh-What is it?"

"Hah... What's the wife gonna say? Our youngest is still such a tender age."

"Ah..."

"I'll write letters, of course, but do you think that's enough?"

"Knowing my sister, she'll probably chase you to Fort Volks."

"I'm certainly not having that! I hear there's another war brewing there!"

"Believe me. I'm against it as well."

If the fortress became caught up in a siege, Regis wasn't sure there would be enough food to accommodate non-military personnel, and

water would also become a valuable commodity once summer came around. Then there was the risk of contagions...

Even if Altina took Enzo's family in as guests, there was no guarantee they would find their living conditions satisfactory.

"Hrm..." Enzo groaned. "Think I should not mention where I'm headed in the letter?"

"She already knows you took on a job from the princess. If you say that you're following the army, she could easily figure out where you're going to be. It wouldn't be all that much trouble for her to find out where the Fourth Army is stationed; unlike our ships, the locations of our armies aren't much of a secret."

"What a situation, huh...?"

"I'll send her a letter as well, just to make sure she doesn't jump the gun."

"She's not that far from the capital, you know. Why not just drop by?"

"Good point. I wouldn't expect too much, though; I can't imagine I'll do any better at dissuading her. At the very least, please decide on a return date and pass that on to her."

"Right. It's not like I plan to settle down with the army or anything. I'll head straight back home once I've finished working on my current orders and the treasured sword."

"Sounds like a plan."

Enzo raised a hand. "Well, good luck then. I'm sure we'll see each other again soon enough."

"Hopefully..."

With that, Enzo went swiftly on his way. His place was quickly taken by Fanrine, who came from the opposite direction with her guard knights. Clarisse, who had also been making her leave, once again reverently lowered her head. Regis did the same, and the woman responded with a courteous bow.

"Who was that just now?" Fanrine asked. "He certainly did not look like a soldier to me..."

"My brother-in-law, Enzo Smith. He's a skilled blacksmith from Rouenne, currently working to repair the soldiers' gear and the princess's sword."

"How wonderful! I should have expected no less from you, Regis. Even your brother-in-law is talented."

"Well, that really has nothing to do with me..."

She was probably just trying to be polite, but Regis felt an uncomfortable itch whenever he received praise. He scratched his head.

"Oh, do excuse me. I haven't been keeping you waiting, have I?" she asked all of a sudden, sounding quite apologetic.

“Not at all. My own carriage isn’t fully prepared yet.”

“Ah, excellent. I certainly would not want to bother you.”

“Ha... Haha...”

Fanrine glanced around. “I had assumed there would be a large crowd seeing you off. Have they already dispersed?”

“I can’t imagine that many people will come. I’m only an administrative officer, I’ll only be gone for a month at most, and the reason for my departure is personal business. It’s really not a big deal...”

“On the contrary, I think it is a very big deal, given your achievements.”

“The most I’ve done is regurgitate information that I just so happened to know. Any accomplishments on the battlefield rightfully belong to the princess.”

Had it been the commander leaving the army today, there would have been lines of soldiers blaring their bugles as they saw her off, no matter how bad the weather or how temporary her leave was. But such a grand sendoff was not necessary for someone such as Regis; in fact, it would have made him rather embarrassed.

Fanrine furrowed her brow. “My, what a lonely life you must live...”

“Not at all. I’ve worked my hardest to see that the princess is trusted as the army’s commander. If they made such a big deal out of someone like me taking a leave of absence, it would only make me more concerned.”

“You underestimate yourself, Regis. I have only been here for a day, but I can already tell that the soldiers hold you in high esteem.”

“Even if what you say is true... the only person who came is Ms. Clarisse here...”

“Ms. Clarisse?”

“Oh, this fine maid right—”

Regis cut himself off, realizing that he might have just made an embarrassing mistake. While Fanrine was affiliated with the Ministry of Military Affairs, she was the daughter of a high noble; perhaps, like many others, she didn’t include servants in the headcount.

However, she gave the maid a gentle smile.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Fanrine Veronica de Tirasio Laverde.”

“...Likewise,” Clarisse replied in a monotone voice, her head respectfully lowered. She gave off quite a contrasting impression to Fanrine, but this did not seem to affect the mood at all.

Perhaps my fears were unfounded... Regis thought, only to spot one of the guards making no attempt to hide his grimace. He was a young knight who looked to be around the same age as Regis and Fanrine,

sporting hair that was wavy like kelp.

“Lady Fannine, please consider your position,” he said. “The daughter of House Tirasio Laverde need not pay her respects to a lowly servant.”

A troubled look crossed Fannine’s face. “Hah... My apologies, Regis. He is a guard of ours—a bit of a watchdog, to be honest. He can be a tad extreme...”

The knight glared at her. “Extreme? Perish the thought. The master has instructed me to ensure that you carry yourself in a manner befitting the daughter of a duke.”

“Yes, well... my grandfather can be a tad extreme too,” she sighed. Clarisse kept her head down the whole time.

A feeling of remorse started to spread through Regis’s chest. He wanted to apologize to the maid. There were so few discriminatory people in the border regiment that he oftentimes forgot about the wall that existed between nobles and commoners in Belgaria—a wall so high that it took more than a lifetime to scale.

When in front of others, Clarisse carried herself as a maid—nothing more. In hindsight, this was probably to avoid situations like this. Regis hadn’t been attentive enough in that regard.

He pointed toward the yard. “Oh, it looks like the carriage is here. We should be on our way.”

Fannine nodded, and the watchdog knight said no more. Together, they stepped out into the rain.

Regis turned back to Clarisse, who was still bowing her head. “I’m sorry...” he quietly apologized, but in her silent and expressionless state, she could offer no response.

I guess I’ll have to write to her as well...

As long as he addressed it to Altina, it would surely reach the maid in one piece.

In the downpour, Fannine waited not at her own carriage but at Regis’s white box-shaped one. “My! What a wonderful carriage you have!” she exclaimed.

“Y-Yes... I received it from Ms. Elenore.”

“Oh, that sister of mine! She already has three husbands, you know. How indecent for her to start investing in a younger man.”

“N-No, that wasn’t her intention... I believe it was a show of thanks for assisting her during the commemoration festival, and a sign that she wished to strengthen political relations with the princess.”

“Fufu. That certainly is an interesting way to put it.”

“Excuse me...?”

Did I say something strange? Regis wondered.

Fannine looked at him with upturned eyes. “Erm... if you wouldn’t mind, may I ride with you?”

“Don’t you have your own carriage?”

The Ministry’s carriage was far more dignified than the standard stagecoach. Even compared to his own, it still held up quite nicely.

“Oh, my apologies...” she said, casting her gaze down. “Was that too forward of me...?”

“No, not at all. We *are* going to be spending quite some time on the road. It would be a huge help if you could tell me more about the capital—within the boundaries of what the Ministry allows you to say, of course.”

Her face lit up. “If my words will be of use to you, then I shall say whatever you want!”



Regis opened the door to his carriage, allowing Fanrine to climb in first. This was a standard practice known to any and all gentlemen of the Empire, even the children; he wouldn’t barge ahead simply because it was raining out.

When he climbed in, she was seated on the bench facing the rear of the carriage. She held out a silk handkerchief. “I must apologize again. Your hair and clothes have gotten a little damper because of me.”

“Hah... Don’t worry, I’m a soldier. I can stand a little water.”

“Oh, how manly.”

“Manly?!”

As far as Regis could remember, he had never heard anyone use that word to describe him before. What made it even stranger was that her cheeks carried an unusual red tinge.

Outside the window, the young knight from before called out, “Prepare to depart!”

While his attitude toward Clarisse certainly hadn’t been a great first impression, the man seemed devoted to his duties. He would probably be a reliable guard.

On the knight’s orders, the driver urged the horses into a walk. Regis could hear their hooves squelching into the mud, and the carriage began to rattle and shake.

He cocked his head slightly. “This is strange...”

“Is something the matter?” Fanrine asked.

“I can’t see any soldiers...”

“It really is strange that nobody came to see you off...”

“I’m fine with that, but... where are our lookouts?”

They passed through the narrow backyard, exiting through the northern gate. The patter of rain against the window grew louder.

“Regis, look!” Fanrine exclaimed, suddenly rising from her seat. She was pointing behind them, in the direction of the fortress.

Wondering what could have happened, Regis opened the side window and stuck out his head. He was immediately met with the bellows of a bugle.

Buglers lined the tops of Boneire's stone walls, playing in unison. It was the rousing tune used to see off troops marching to war. Crowds of soldiers appeared from the hills lining the sides of the road, their spears waving both the banners of the army and the Empire.

Among them, he even spotted Abidal-Evra.

"Salute the strategist, Regis d'Aurick!"

The soldiers lining the path in orderly file straightened their backs, moving their clenched right fists to the left of their chests. With their spears on display, it was almost as though they were marching down the main streets of Versailles in the emperor's parade.

"Wh-Why?" Regis squeaked. He was at a complete loss for words.

"Because you have done enough to deserve it," Fanrine explained, sitting back down on the bench. She was gazing at Regis with the same eyes as her sister, a woman known as the Vixen of the South.

Paying no heed to the rain, Regis kept the window open to watch the soldiers. Some sang the same rousing war song, while others screamed out messages of their own.

"Stay safe, Tactician!"

"You're the reason we're still alive!"

"Glory to the wizard!"

"Make sure you come back!"

"God bless the nation's hero!"

"You're the greatest strategist we could ever ask for!"

"We love you, Tactician!"

"Don't go!"

"Come back soon! Please!"

"We'll be waiting for you, Sir Regis!"

It truly was a grand sendoff.

Regis's eyes were initially opened wide in shock, but then he cast them down. "I... I don't understand..."

"You might not, but the soldiers clearly do. They know who they owe their victory to."

"It was... the princess..."

"The princess has her own accomplishments too, of course. But would they not have lost the war without a certain skilled tactician by the name of Regis d'Aurick?"

Regis shook his head. "I doubt it. I mean, even without my suggestions... I'm sure someone would have found a way to win through other means. Belgaria is a strong nation; it always has been."

"You humble yourself."

"That's not it. I just... I didn't do well at all. I failed. We had far

more casualties than I expected. I mean, as their strategist, I should have thought up a solution that wouldn't have led to *any* deaths. Too many have fallen in this war. How am I supposed to look their families in the eye? How can I tell them that I did a good job?"

"Regis... has anyone ever told you to think about the living?"

Fanrine asked with a smile.

"Yes, but..."

Clarisse had said it when she was consoling him, as had Altina.

"I feel the same way," she continued. "Rather than focusing on the lives lost, you should consider the people you have saved. The people who are still alive... and who will continue to live, thanks to you."

"That probably is the best way of looking at things."

Regis understood that deep down, but the more people heaped praise on him, the less he felt like he truly deserved it. He couldn't help but feel that he could have done so much better, and as time passed, new ideas would come to him—things he could have done instead.

Fanrine's eyes turned to the window. "Subjectivity is important, but you must accept objective critiques as well, regardless of how they compare to your own opinions of yourself."

"For better or worse..."

She nodded, the sharp glint in her eyes concealed beneath a gentle smile. There was no denying that she was a woman with a peculiar air about her.

"Regis, those who are highly evaluated are also burdened with high expectations. This fact does not change, no matter how little self-confidence one might have. Successes bring with them the anticipation of even further successes. It is just as unavoidable as failures being scorned."

"That does seem to be how it works... It seems to come naturally in every story that I've read too."

"But regardless of whether you are confident, or whether you have lofty expectations placed on you... you can only do your best. So why should you worry so much about how others appraise you?"

"...Yeah."

At the very least, Regis understood how pointless it was to tell other people that he didn't believe in himself. After all, his lack of confidence wouldn't change his circumstances—people would still heap their expectations onto him, and there would still be problems thrust before him that he needed to find solutions to.

I shouldn't lament my lack of confidence, but rather focus on finding my next move.

"Hold your head up with pride, Regis. You do not have to wave to them, but... at least look at them while they see you off."

“You certainly are a wise woman, Ms. Fanrine.”

“Fufu... You know, Regis, there are people in this world who must shoulder countless expectations simply by virtue of being born. One simply has to get used to it.”

“I see. That’s an interesting way to look at things...”

Somehow, Regis managed to raise his head. Among the lines of troops was a face that he instantly recognized—a certain one-eared soldier. Dukas the conscript stood with his fingers locked in prayer, his hands brandished overhead.

“Thank you, Tactician!” he cried, notably louder than the rest.

Regis remembered his pleas—his desire to keep his family safe. Had High Britannia made it to the capital, the surrounding nations would have likely taken the opportunity to attack as well. Regardless of the result of such a war, Dukas’s family would have been put at considerable risk.

Both he and his family had been saved. That was something to rejoice about.

It was hard to say the eastern front was stable, by any means, but High Britannia’s invasion had been stopped. Regis had managed to protect some lives in his own way.

A faint heat spread through his chest, bringing warmth to the corners of his eyes.

“Was I... useful to somebody...?”

“Your actions saved a million imperial lives,” Fanrine softly replied.

Regis lowered his face into his hands, his shoulders trembling ever so slightly. Meanwhile, the carriage slipped through the lines of soldiers, picking up speed on its way to the capital.

The fanfare of the bugles grew more and more distant.

On June 10th, in the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar, Regis d’Aurick separated from the Fourth Army.

The streetlights on the main road gave off a warm orange hue. It had unfortunately continued to rain throughout their journey, but they managed to reach the imperial capital of Verseilles by night that same day.

“This takes me back...” Regis said, gazing at the townscape from the carriage window.

“Have you been away for a while?” Fanrine asked from the opposite seat.

“I returned for the ceremony, but the scenery changes quite a bit when there’s a festival going on.”

“I see. It is already late, so perhaps we should visit the Ministry tomorrow.”

"You're right... I'll need to book an inn somewhere."

"Oh, do you not have anywhere to stay?"

"I do have some acquaintances, but I wouldn't want to suddenly impose on them like that. Plus, I'll need somewhere to park the carriage."

"You're a soldier, aren't you? Why not ask around the barracks?"

"Where the First Army is stationed? We met under rather... *unfortunate* circumstances just two months ago. I don't have the nerve for that."

"Now that you mention it..."

Regis feared that any room he borrowed from the First Army might soon become a morgue. Just the thought sent a chill down his nape.

"We had a house around the outskirts, once upon a time... We sold it when my sister got married, and I was staying in the academy dorms."

"What about your parents?"

"...An epidemic took them both. It's not too uncommon."

"Is that so...? I can certainly relate; I lost my mother in an epidemic."

"Really?"

"She succumbed to illness after having Elenore, me, and our younger brother Roland. After that, our father remarried and had another two daughters."

"Oh, I see."

Regis recalled that Elenore had mentioned having a third sister who was eight years old. That was a considerable age gap now that he thought back on it, but it made sense if she was the child of a new wife.

Fanrine directed an anxious glance out the window.

"I don't mean to pry into your private matters, but... is something bothering you?" Regis asked.

"Me? Oh, my apologies... I do not know what came over me."

"I suppose telling me wouldn't actually help very much..."

"Oh, that's not true!" Fanrine replied, suddenly waving her hands. "My brother Roland was on my mind, that is all."

"Is that so?"

"I am unsure who he takes after, but he can be somewhat extreme... He is currently studying abroad in High Britannia."

He refused to be schooled in Belgaria, and boasted an ideology that Fanrine was hesitant to bring up. "Is he a liberalist?" Regis asked.

"Troublesomely enough."

"I can't deny that they make some good points; we should be free to foster our own sense of values."

“My! I certainly did not expect this from a soldier—and the princess’s strategist, at that!”

“Please don’t mistake me for a revolutionary. I hear they’ve been gaining a lot more influence as of late... Rash changes will only invite more chaos, but I do agree that the country needs to grow in a better direction. And when that happens, perhaps it would be worthwhile to take various views into consideration. That’s why dipping one’s toes into all sorts of philosophies is very much in the interest of the nation.”

“Fufu... Thank you. I am sure my brother would love to hear that.”

“I know I’m pretty unconvincing though...”

Still, High Britannia? That is rather concerning...

The army marching for the capital had retreated, but they were still within imperial territory and a peace treaty had yet to be negotiated. Hostilities had died down owing to Belgaria losing its emperor and High Britannia no longer having a supply chain, but the two nations were still very much at war.

“Granted, he does send me letters.”

“You’re still in contact with him? That’s a relief.”

“Yes. I have told him to tread carefully.”

“You’ll see him again soon enough; I doubt this war is going to drag on for much longer.”

Regis predicted that Latrielle would end the war in its early stages. The prince had expended too many soldiers in the conflict, and there was an urgent need for him to rebuild the nation’s war fronts. Plus, putting pressure on the nobility meant he would need to remain wary of an insurrection. It was hard to imagine him going on the counteroffensive now; he simply didn’t have the strength.

I’d definitely love to hear what he thinks on the matter...

Fanrine put her hands together. “Oh, right. Regis, please come to my manor.”

“Eh?”

“It is not very large, mind you, but there is space for the carriage, and it is conveniently close to the palace.”

“You mean... on that street where all the nobles line their villas?”

“You are also a noble, you know.”

“I wouldn’t say that...”

The imperial palace was surrounded with rows of noble manors, all so extravagantly splendid that one might assume they were competing. The street was regularly patrolled by guards, and commoners who even came in close proximity would receive stern glares. While Regis could technically be considered a noble himself, there was hardly anywhere that would make him more unsettled.

"I would be quite grateful if you would," Fanrine added.

"Why do you say that...?"

"The Ministry did instruct me to protect you."

Protect a third-grade administrative officer?

"I see... So you want to monitor me."

"The higher-ups are worried. They fear the man who managed to conquer Fort Volks and achieve so much during the war."

"They're really overestimating me, then."

"Fufu... Are you sure? If you put together a plan in earnest, do you not think the Fourth Army could occupy the capital? Can you say with certainty that it would be impossible?"

Regis shrugged. "Just because there are a few clouds in the sky doesn't mean you need to brace for lightning..."

They must be embellishing the events like some tall tale, he thought. It would be rather troublesome if war reports were being handled in the same way as imperial court gossip.

"Whatever the case, the Ministry ordered me to observe your every action until you leave the capital. Please, do not hesitate to stick around."

"Hm... I'm surprised you agreed to that. I'm not one to bring peerage into military matters, but Ms. Fanrine, aren't you from a ducal house?"

"Oh, I had already heard all about you from Elenore, so I did not believe you were as scary as they made you out to be."

"I see..."

"So when the position opened up, I volunteered."

"You volunteered for this?!"

"Fufu... After how much my sister talked you up, you can hardly blame me for getting interested. I wanted to see the sort of person you were for myself."

"Then I've probably disappointed you quite a bit... I really haven't got much going for me."

"That is your impression. I shall keep mine a secret," Fanrine said with a wink.

Regis had grown anxious upon hearing that he was visiting a noble's manor, but there was no doubting that the Tirasio Laverde House was a part of Fourth Princess Argentina's faction. Its members likely didn't want to see Latrielle come to power, so perhaps they would even help him gather information.

Considering how the First Army's knights likely felt about him, Regis would need to take his own safety into consideration. He also needed to look at things from a financial perspective. While he was in the capital on official business, it was his own personal circumstances preventing him from using the barracks; the army would not pay his

lodging fees, and those costs would pile up over the month he was due to stay.

In the end, Regis decided it was best to concede. “If you wouldn’t mind, then please lead the way.”

“Aha! Gladly!” Fanrine exclaimed with a childlike grin.

As expected, the young watchdog knight was against this decision, but Fanrine quashed his protests with a proud declaration that this was “official business.”

The Tiraso Laverde manor was so close to the palace that Regis easily would have believed it was an imperial annex—and a large one, at that. They had apparently purchased what had once belonged to another major house.

Upon their arrival, they were welcomed by hordes of servants.

Fanrine carried herself with confidence—it was her house, after all. Her sister Elenore and the head of the house lived in the main manor in the southern regions, so she was apparently the only person from the family who stayed here.

“Please, relax. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, Ms. Fanrine.”

“And if you really wish, you can actually make this your home as well.”

“Ha... haha.”

What could she possibly mean by that?

Regis was granted a room at the back of the third floor. It was vast, with a writing desk and a bed so extravagant that it took him by surprise.

No escape route, though...

There was a large window, but jumping from the third story wasn’t something a person could manage without injury—Altina and Eddie notwithstanding. He would need to trust the people of the house. On the bright side, the lack of an emergency exit meant that there were few routes that an outside invader could take.

Regis put down his bags and lowered himself into a chair. It was already growing dark out. Tomorrow was when it would all begin, so for now, he would need to get some proper rest.

“Maybe I could read just a little, though... Before bed. Just a little... Ah, it’s been so long. When was the last time I could kick back with a book like this? Hah...”



Of course, that little bit of reading ended up lasting the entire night. Regis only noticed it was morning when a maid knocked on his door to tell him it was time for breakfast.

“Aah, ’tis true that I am an abject failure,” he sighed, his words

clearly influenced by the book he had just been immersed in.

I was planning on going out to gather intel early in the morning... he thought, but instead, he decided to have breakfast. He made his way to the dining room with the maid's guidance.

Fanrine was already seated when he arrived, dressed prim and proper. She had worn a military uniform when she came to Fort Boneire, but now she pulled off a dazzling dress befitting a lady of her stature. Perhaps this was her usual attire.

"Good morning, Regis."

"Yes, good morning, Ms. Fanrine."

"Were you, erm... unable to sleep, perhaps? There are bags under your eyes. I can have the bed swapped out, if you so wish."

"Oh, no, there wasn't an issue! I just got caught up in a book I was reading."

"Was it that interesting?"

"Hm... It was pretty average, plus I'd already read it three times during the expedition..."

"And you spent the entire night reading it again?! Why on earth would you do that?!"

"Well, reading is my hobby. I've never had the chance to read it cover to cover in one sitting, and soon after I started, I made a few new discoveries."

"I see... Are you that much of an avid reader?"

"Books are great, you know. I always wanted to work at the military library."

"I should have expected no less from you, Regis. You truly are a studious man."

"Oh, the books I choose to read are all purely entertainment. I've never considered it studying."

"Entertainment...?"

"Indeed. Oh, it's been so long since I've visited a bookstore in the capital. I can't wait! I was initially planning to leave at the crack of dawn, but then I remembered that the stores don't open until eight. I used to have a full grasp of the business hours and restock schedule of every bookstore I frequented, but my memory is hazy after being away for such a long time. Hah... I really need to restrain myself."

The clock on the wall indicated that it was only seven. Bookshops, like art galleries and jewelers, were still considered stores for the nobility, so they did not operate in the early morning hours. Commoner stores, in contrast, opened at sunrise, with the stalls securing their spots even earlier than that.

Fanrine tilted her head. "Are you going to a bookstore now?"

"Yes. I'll only be gone for a bit after breakfast."

"That is, err, quite troublesome. I need you to come to the

Ministry..."

"Oh, of course. We can stop by the bookstore on the way there."

"The Ministry should be opening its doors right around now, and we need to be there before noon."

It opens that early? I suppose it has to, given how long it takes them to get anything done... Regis mused before shaking those thoughts from his head. There was nothing better than finishing up his business here as soon as possible. He could gather the information he needed, then return to Fort Volks early.

"Y-You're right," he stammered. "To the Ministry we go. We can visit the bookstore on the way back."

"Please calm down, Regis. You've not even eaten breakfast yet."

"Oh, right. Yes. Of course."

Regis's breakfast was even more indulgent than what he had been served during his stay at the palace: the bread was soft, springy and warm, served with honey-drizzled potatoes, a duck roast, and fresh tomatoes; and the aroma of the accompanying tea struck him before his hand had even touched his teacup.

It was delicious. Very delicious, but...

He was so preoccupied with going to the bookstore that the divine flavors barely even registered.

The Ministry of Military Affairs was set up in a corner of the imperial palace, La Branne. They also had a branch in town, from which Regis had received his previous directive—perhaps because he was only a fifth-grade at the time and was essentially being demoted.

Now, however, as he was rising to the rank of third-grade, he was called directly to the palace.

The room he was currently in was excessively decorated, brimming with ornamentation completely unnecessary for desk work. There was one desk with two seats across from it, and at each of the four corners was either a flower vase or a statuette.

After being kept waiting for quite some time, Minister Berard, a man with a peculiarly threatening air to him, made his appearance.

"I don't care if they call you a war hero, nor do I care if you're the princess's favorite—you will *not* receive any special treatment from me," he proclaimed without so much as a greeting. "Regulations must be observed no matter what, for that is what forms the shape of a nation!"

For a moment, Regis grew anxious, wondering whether the man had mistaken him for a barbarian of some sort. What he had said was actually quite reasonable, though.

"I share that opinion, sir."

"Good."

First, Regis was handed *The Makings of a Third-Grade*, a book containing everything he would need to know after his promotion. The minister went on and on in his supplementary instruction, his monotonous recitation starting from the basic regulations that even a child would know.

The promotion came with an examination. Perhaps it had already begun; perhaps this droning explanation was the arduous endurance portion. If so, Regis was sure that he was set to fail; his sleep deprivation weighed heavily upon him. He couldn't help but think that this would all be over much quicker if the minister just allowed him to go and read the book.

Reading is wonderful. It's something you can enjoy at your own pace. You can skip all the boring parts, and go over the interesting bits again and again. If you come across something that you don't know or understand, you can just look it up, and no one's there to judge you for it. Nobody gets angry if you're nursing a cup of coffee at the same time—heck, you could even eat some bread. They don't glare or clear their throat no matter how much you slouch, and they certainly don't criticize your apparent lack of motivation.

“...And that should be everything. Make sure you read that book carefully. There will be an exam in one week,” Berard concluded, the irritation clear in his voice.

“What sort of exam?”

“Raise your hand if you want to ask a question, Aurick!”

The minister—and many others, for that matter—had a fixation on formality. As Regis had yet to receive his peerage or promotion, he was still considered a fifth-grade and a commoner. He didn't intend to make a stand over something he considered so trivial, though.

Regis raised his hand. It certainly felt like he was participating in a farce of some sort, given that they were the only two people in the room. “Might I ask what manner of exam it is?”

“Oh? Despite your clear lack of motivation, you still want to pass?” Berard asked, folding his arms with a triumphant smile across his lips.

“Er, not really?” Regis replied, cocking his head to one side. “I'm more concerned about returning to Fort Volks before something happens. Whether or not I pass doesn't matter to me, so long as you let me go.”

“Gh... If you dare fail, you'll need to retake it! A week later!”

“That sounds troublesome... Can you not just tell me what material to cover?”

“That would make things too easy. You'll find everything you need to know in that book. If you forget the contents and can't formulate an answer, you fail.”

“Oh, I just have to give answers from the book? That’s a relief. Then I should do just fine.”

“Hmph! Don’t be so naive! That book is three hundred pages long! Three hundred pages! And you only have a week to read it!”

“Can I take the exam tomorrow?”

“Grr... Don’t get in over your head, Aurick. There’s a practical portion too, you know! I may not look it, but I have trained under the court sword instructor. Now, I’m not saying you have to beat me, but you *will* have to display the lowest level of swordsmanship expected of a soldier.”

“Eh?”

“Yes, an admin officer should focus on his paperwork, but we have standards. Any commissioned officer of the Belgian Army must be able to handle himself.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have to admit, though, it really is the bare minimum—pretty much just being able to swing a sword without dropping it. Your status as a commoner matters not; I will observe regulations, and nobody receives special treatment.”

“I can’t...”

“Wh-What?”

“Oh, um, what happens if someone can’t swing a sword...? Say it smacks into their knee when they lower it, or—”

“Who in their right mind would accept a soldier like that?! They’d fail, no two ways about it! We’d have them start over from the academy!”

“Oh dear...”

Berard did have a point. Regis had done so poorly at the academy that, had Marquis Thénèzey not hired him, he would have been forced to repeat a year. In fact, he’d technically only graduated as an exception.

There was no doubt in his mind—he was going to fail the exam.

To think Belgaria’s infatuation with physical strength would rear its ugly head here of all places! What a nation we live in! Something must change! And fast!

Regis wasn’t wrong—something did need to change. He needed to improve his swordsmanship, but he was already sure it was much too late to do anything about that. The only thing he could do now was despair.

“Mn?” Seeing that Regis was acting strange, Berard tilted his head. “In any case, the details of the exam are spelled out in the book as well, so read it properly! That is all. You are excused!”

“Yes, sir.”

With that, Regis exited the room, walking with the downtrodden

gait of a defeated unit's last survivor.

The Ministry of Nobility down the hall issued Regis a light warning for his failure to answer his summons, but aside from that, they weren't very harsh at all—rather, they treated him quite courteously. It became evident quite quickly that this was because they were wary of Altina; the majesty of the fourth princess shaped their every exchange.

From both Ministries' points of view, Regis was the princess's favorite and a youth who had proven his mettle on the battlefield. But while the Ministry of Military Affairs had responded to this by sending out an officer putting on a stronger front than was necessary, the Ministry of Nobility was coaxing him like a cat, almost as if asking him to put in a good word with the princess.

Regis was similarly handed a book: *The Makings of a Chevalier*. He wouldn't be formally tested on it, but someone would stop by in two weeks' time to ask a few questions and make sure he was up to par. His conferment seemed as though it would end without issue, but the practical portion of his promotion exam still loomed over him.

I knew it. It's impossible for a failure like me to become a third-grade officer.



Waiting in the hall outside the Ministry of Nobility, Fannine was engaged in conversation with her friends—a gaggle of young noble lasses. The girls all smiled when they eventually spotted Regis, stabbing into him with their inquisitive eyes.

The three canary-like women were whispering amongst themselves, holding up fans to cover their mouths. The pretty garments they wore were straight out of paintings, but Fannine stood out even among them. She exuded a certain showiness, or perhaps even a luster.

“Good work, Regis. I was just gossiping with my friends.”

“About what...?”

“Fufufu. About your military might.”

Might?! When I'm worried about not being able to pass a simple sword-swinging exam?!

“Um, are you sure you don't mean military blight? Were you having a laugh?”

The three girls giggled, their laughter like bell chimes.

“See? Isn't he a funny one?” Fannine said.

One girl nodded from behind her fan. “He really is exactly as you described him!”

“They say he's the hero who saved the Empire, so I was sure he

would be as frightening as a lion,” added another.

There were apparently rumors spreading about him, but Regis was too scared to ask for the details. As he watched the girls, a certain passage from Baron Vigeville’s *Palace of Twilight* came to mind:

“Noble girls thirst for entertainment, cowering at the thought of time spent in boredom. Even the most meager of rumors will immediately inflate, and it takes but a week in the imperial court for a kitten to become a tiger. They idolize men with military exploits as they would knights from fairy tales, and likewise fall in love.”

No, it couldn’t be... Regis thought with a wry smile. It was published in a book, sure, but he wasn’t childish enough to juxtapose himself with the strong and smart heroes the baron was depicting.

However, before he knew it, he was surrounded.

“Sir Regis, please tell us how you beat down those soldiers from High Britannia.”

“Me? Oh, I’m not the one who fought them.”

“Ooh, that’s such a unique uniform you have on. I’ve hardly been able to make out the ones I’ve seen thus far due to all the medals, so it’s rare to see one so pristine. Why, it looks rather manly.”

“This is the uniform of the Beilschmidt border regiment, and my rank certainly isn’t anything impressive...”

“Fufufu. This is the first time I’ve met a gentleman who refuses to brag. How wonderful. Absolutely wonderful, I say.”

“You’re quite the intellectual, Sir Regis. I admire that.”

It’s hopeless.

Singing men’s praises came as easily to them as breathing, for that was the secret to success in the imperial court. He knew it was all empty flattery done out of courtesy, but he could still feel a cold sweat running down his back.

“Err... I have somewhere I need to be. Pardon me!”

When Regis tried to slip through them, however, they refused to move. He ultimately found himself planted in one of their chests.

“Oh.”

“My! How bold.”

“Hey...!”

Regis frantically pulled away. The frilly cloth and soft sensations had sent his head spinning.

With a bitter smile on her face, Fanrine gave him a push in the right direction. “You shouldn’t tease him too much, okay? Can’t you see he’s uncomfortable?”

The noble girls’ eyes sparkled.

“Haaah! He’s a military hero, yet he’s also like a puppy!” one exclaimed. “Cute!”

“A-Ahem, would you like to come to our next tea party?” another

bashfully asked.

They see me as a pet?!

With Fanrine's protection, Regis managed to escape the hall, eventually finding himself outside. The wind whisked away the lingering scent of perfume.

"Hah... That was... something..."

"I'm sorry, Regis. I didn't think they would take to you *that* well."

"Well, I'm sure it's rare to come across soldiers like me."

"You're right. When it comes to the troops you see around these parts, they have uniforms emblazoned with medals, and they brag about their muscles and achievements."

"Haha... I have neither medals nor muscles."

"And that's precisely why they like you."

"They sure have a strange way of showing it..."

Regis didn't want to be someone's dog. He didn't mind being ordered around, but if possible, he wanted to support someone with their own ambitions. Once again, he thought of Altina and his promise to write to her.

But it seemed that could wait for now. By the time he realized it, his legs were already leading him to the bookstore.



It was a splendid two-story building facing the main road, its signboard consisting of white text over a green background. Inside were rows upon rows of shelves, each lined with countless books.

"Waaaaaah..."

Regis felt as though he might just melt away. In fact, he wouldn't have minded becoming one with the air that occupied this space.

"Incredible," Fanrine murmured as she looked around curiously. "I've never seen so many books before. There are more here than our personal collection."

"There are books at the manor?"

"My grandfather sometimes buys them, but we're more often given them by our business partners. Our house deals in paper products too, you see."

"Hm, that sounds nice."

"My family does not read much. I'll show you where they are when we return, so please, read as much as you want."

Regis's eyes widened. *Read as much as you want*—did such splendid words truly exist in the Belgarian language? He hadn't heard anything like that since Marquis Thénézay took him on.

"You are a wonderful person, Ms. Fanrine."

"Eh? Just over a few books?!"

"Thank you. I'll be sure to take you up on your offer."

“R-Right... You really do like reading, don’t you?”

“I would consider myself an avid reader, yes.”

Fanrine’s collection was certainly enticing, but Regis had been away from the capital for half a year now, and there were a number of new series that he wanted to buy.

He found his home in books written purely for entertainment. He liked dramas, miscellaneous ramblings, and works of pure fiction. The words decorating a certain cover captured his current emotional state perfectly:

To Hell with Dying When I Can Read.

Precisely. He wanted to enjoy all the stories the world had to offer, flipping the pages by his own hand, persevering alone without bothering anyone...

“—is? Regis?”

“Hah?!”

“Um, are you quite all right?” Fanrine asked. “I can call a cab if you’re not feeling well.”

“No, I’m fine. Sorry. I was so happy that I went to dreamland for a moment there.”

“Are you really okay?!”

“Maybe not... But this is the norm for me.”

He scoured the shelf, feeling so light on his feet that he could have taken to the skies. Each and every book here went for a fraction of what they would have cost on the border, assuming he was even lucky enough to find them there. They were still quite expensive, but this was as low as they went.

Most importantly, the selection was marvelous.

The new volumes of the series he wanted were all right where he could see them. There were plenty of interesting-looking books he had never seen before as well.

“What do I do? Have I wandered into heaven?”

“Hey, Regis... What’s that over there?”

“Hm?”

He followed Fanrine’s finger to the bookshop’s café area.

“This place was originally a café, so they decided to incorporate that aspect into the store. You can bring the books you’ve bought there and read them over a cup of coffee. It’s a bit of a luxury, don’t you think?”

“A luxury, you say?” Fanrine muttered, eyeing the café curiously.

“I’m going to be some time. Why not have a drink while you wait?”

“Oh, no... I want to stay with you.”

“Surveillance duty, eh? You certainly are a hard worker.”

“Perish the thought! I want to stay by your side for personal

reasons.”

“Y-Yeah?”

In the midst of their conversation, Regis spotted a familiar face at the back of the shop. He raised a hand to greet her.

“Hey, Mrs. Carol.”

“Eh?! Oh, Regis!”

The earnest-looking woman tidying the books jogged over. She had black hair styled in a shoulder-length bob and wore an indigo apron.

“Hello.”

“It really is you, Regis! What are you doing here?! You haven’t come to haunt the store, have you?!”

“Hahah... I’m alive, don’t worry.”

It did seem likely that he’d haunt a bookstore when he eventually passed, though, and that was the most troublesome place to find a ghost. He would need to make sure that he didn’t die prematurely.

“You’ve become the talk of the town,” Carol said, her gaze suddenly turning to Fanrine. “Hm? Who is this lovely lady?”

“Ms. Fanrine from House Tirasio Laverde.”

Once introduced, Fanrine gave a dignified bow. Unlike the bookshops on the border, this store was frequented by noblewomen, so she did not feel out of place.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” she said.

“Welcome to our store. I’m the owner, Carol de Talleyrand.”



"I've never seen so many books before. It honestly took me by surprise."

"Is this your first time visiting? If so, would you like a coffee on the house? You too, Regis. I'd love to hear what you've been up to."

"Thank you. I just might take you up on that."

Fanrine looked a little shocked. "Um, Regis... do you have a special relationship with Carol here?"

"Special? There's no doubt in my mind that she understands me better than anyone in the world."

"More than..."

"I mean, this is where I've bought most of the books I've read."

"I really appreciate your patronage," Carol chimed in. "I've stocked plenty of stories that you might be interested in."

"Haha... I don't think my pockets are deep enough for them all."

Fanrine gave a relieved smile. "I see, so your relationship is that of a merchant and a customer."

"What else would it be...?" Regis asked, cocking his head to the side.

They sat around a table in the corner. Regis took a sip of coffee, closing his eyes as the nostalgic flavor washed over his tongue.

"Phew..."

"Hey Regis, do you know this one?" Carol asked, pulling a book from her bag.

"Is that... a new volume of Cuer's *A Meteor's Journey*? But hasn't that series already concluded?"

"Take a closer look. This is a collection of short stories released after it was finished."

A short story collection?! That's a thing? Actually, on second thought, I suppose it's not the first of its kind.

"That's delightful. I think I'll take it."

"Pleasure doing business with you. Fufufu. And did you hear about this one coming out?"

"Eh? A continuation of Baron Drawnou's *Tea and Treat*?! But the original released over two years ago!"

"Turns out it was a two-parter. This one's the conclusion."

"Argh... I don't have much money to spare, but if that's the conclusion... I may as well get it."

"We also have the latest work by Count Ludosel."

"Hah... The count... Why doesn't he finish up his previous series first? I'll still buy it, though."

"Right, right. I *also* thought you might like this other one."

"Hm, a vampire has to put on a play? And they're acting as a vampire *in the play*?!"

“You like those ‘play within a play’ ones, right?”

“Hahaha... I’m no match for you, Carol. Of course I’m buying it.”

There was a dubious look on Fanrine’s face. “Regis, just how many books are you going to buy?”

“Whoops... I nearly forgot myself. Books are important, but I’m here for something else today.”

Carol tilted her head. “Oh, that’s rare. How can I help?”

“Err... It’s something that I can’t say too loudly...”

Regis first looked at Fanrine. Her house was part of the fourth princess’s faction, and he didn’t think she would do much to get in his way. But the fact remained that she was there to keep an eye on him.

Which side is she on?

Fanrine was elegantly leaning into her seat, her eyes on an open book. The title read, *The Path of Dreams*. It seemed to be a collection of poems.

“My, what wonderful verse. It’s so enthralling that I could very well forget everything going on around me...” she thought aloud. Her words sounded deliberately forced, indicating that she would turn a blind eye to their conversation.

Regis turned back to Carol. “The truth is, there’s something I want you to look into.”

Carol looked to her left, then her right. There didn’t seem to be any customers paying them any attention. “I’ll do whatever’s within my power,” she replied.

“You have a broad circle of associates, Carol. You know quite a few people related to the court and plenty of other reliable individuals.”

“I’m not sure I can live up to your expectations. You’re probably the most reliable person I know.”

“Eh...?”

“They’re calling you a national hero, you know. The Battlefield Wizard, the Monster Tactician, the Princess’s Shield—names straight out of fiction.”

“Pff—?!” Regis made a strange sound.

“Fufufu... And to think you used to be the Green Turtle. Oh, pardon me.”

“No, at this point, I’d rather be the turtle... Hah...”

“But to me, you’ve always been Regis the Reader. So, what do you want me to investigate?”

“Please have a look at this.”

Regis handed over a book with a letter stuck between its pages. Carol opened and read it on the spot. For just a brief moment, her expression clouded over.

“Oh my... That’s rather concerning.”

“Please tell me if you find out anything. I’ll drop by every day while I’m in the capital.”

“Very well. I’ll be waiting for you.”

He had spelled out all the important details in the letter: he was asking her to look into the deaths of the emperor and his consort.

Carol herself did not have the power to investigate the imperial court, but among her clientele were people who made a living off of gathering intelligence. A bookstore was a place where various talents gathered, and her talent was remembering the tastes of every customer to discern the perfect recommendations.

She did not just sell books; she oftentimes developed a deeper relationship with her customers. Using her connections, she would probably be able to gather more information than the Fourth Army’s spies who had only just been sent out.

“Incidentally, Regis...” Carol began, changing the topic. “I know you might not want to talk about it, but would you tell me about the war with High Britannia?”

“Is this what you want as payment?”

“I’m not going to force you, but there are a few people coming around, asking questions. Reporters from the weekly paper and such. They know you and I are pretty close, and I feel bad sending them away empty-handed.”

I see. Reporters might have information about what goes on in the palace... Once he started considering it as negotiation fodder, talking about the war became much easier.

“Got it. But nothing really happened that was wondrous enough to be worth embellishing. They might just be disappointed.”

“There are people in the world who see worth not in dramatized stories, but in the plain truth.”

“I get where they’re coming from. I do enjoy fiction, but sometimes I just want to know what really happened.”

Regis spoke of his experiences on the battlefield in as much detail as he could. Halfway through, he noticed that Carol had started taking notes.

Fanrine, meanwhile, read her poems in silence.

That night—

Upon their return to the Tiraso Laverde manor, Regis and Fanrine were greeted with many reverent bows. One of the maids came out front to meet them.

“Welcome back, milady. Welcome back, Sir Aurick.”

Her address sounded so foreign that, for a moment, Regis didn’t realize that it was also directed at him.

“Ah, are you talking to me?”

“You had a visitor while you were away, Sir Aurick.”

“Here?”

“Yes, they left a letter.”

The paper that the maid held out had been stamped with the seal of the Ministry of Military Affairs.

“What’s going on...?” Regis asked.

“I told the Ministry you were staying at my house,” Fanrine answered. “They’ll start digging if they don’t know your whereabouts.”

“Oh... That makes sense.”

She had been tasked with surveillance, and that included reporting on his movements. It would be troublesome if she reported on their conversation at the bookstore, though...

Fanrine smiled. “I’m not a fool. A hunting cat hides her claws, as they say.”

“I see...”

But a change in circumstance might yield a change in her intent. Regis knew that he needed to be wary, but for now, he decided to trust her. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to make any moves.

He undid the wax seal on the letter. While it had been sent through the Ministry, it was a summons from Latrielle.



Afternoon, the next day—

Regis once again paid a visit to the palace. Latrielle’s personal room was near the section used by the Ministry of Military Affairs. He had been there once before.

A soldier in light armor stood before the large door, giving Regis a crisp salute as he approached. “Third-Grade Admin Officer Aurick. Please wait a moment.”

“Of course.”

Regis was starting to grow accustomed to people recognizing him. This was his third time meeting with Latrielle, so there were surely people who knew his face by now.

The guard knocked on the door and announced Regis’s arrival, then waited a moment before opening it.

“Enter!”

“Thank you.”

Regis returned the man’s salute and walked into the room.

Latrielle was sitting on a finely made leather chair, with papers spread all over his large work desk. There was no chessboard this

time. A steel protector was stretched across his forehead, partially obscured beneath his golden locks. His red eyes glanced at Regis.

"I'm sorry for calling you all the way here, Regis d'Aurick."

"Oh, no. I should have come here yesterday."

"I've already received your report, don't worry."

The report that Regis had sent in was indeed one of the papers on Latrielle's desk. He grew anxious, wondering whether he had made a mistake of some sort. As he racked his brain, he realized that he had never mentioned what happened to the Mercenary King after their battle. He had also sent a division east just before leaving for the capital, so that hadn't yet been reported either.

"Um... If there's something that I've missed, I'll correct it at once..."

"Commendable spirit, but that can wait. I want you to look at this," Latrielle said, pointing at a single map on his desk.

"This is..."

It was a map of the area around Grebeauvoir, a fortified city to the northwest serving as the base of the Empire's Third Army. While it was not on the same level as Fort Volks, it was supposed to be quite formidable.

"We received an urgent report last night," Latrielle sighed.

"From Grebeauvoir?"

"It seems the city has fallen to High Britannia."

"What?!"

Regis was surprised they had managed to capture and occupy a fortified city, especially given that he had expected them to make for either Germania or the coast.

"There were Germanian flags spotted among the enemy army," Latrielle continued.

"Have the two forged an alliance? If so... I can't believe it."

"Grebeauvoir is the Third Army's base, but the expedition meant they had less than half their usual numbers stationed there. High Britannia must have seen its chance."

"Right... but how did they take it so quickly?"

"More details should arrive tonight, but we can't just sit around and wait. There are many civilians living in that town. Although we don't have a grasp on the situation, we have to begin forming a unit to rescue them."

"That sounds appropriate."

"But that introduces another problem: it is possible that this is merely a diversion, and the enemy is still aiming for Versailles."

"Right. While a large army is marching toward an empty Grebeauvoir, the enemy might take a detour to assault the newly defenseless capital."

“If only it had protective walls...”

Under the arrogant notion that Belgaria was too powerful for an enemy army to get anywhere close to the capital, it was built without walls. Verseilles had been the capital for three hundred years now, and while it had thus far lived up to that claim, this overconfidence was the reason they couldn't send too many soldiers to Grebeauvoir.

Regis cocked his head. “Are you ordering the Fourth Army to take it back?”

“No, they have an important duty to defend Fort Volks. Besides, Grebeauvoir is the base of the Third Army, whose soldiers are already here at the capital. There is no questioning who we should send.”

“Right...”

In that case, the question was why he had called Regis. Perplexed as he was, he decided to listen quietly and see where this was going.

Latrielle produced a map of an even wider area, then began placing several pieces atop it. “At present, we have seventy thousand soldiers in the capital. Grebeauvoir has High Britannia's sixteen thousand, and we can expect Germanians as well.”

“I see, I see...”

“In your professional opinion, Regis, how many troops would you send out?”

“Eh? I, uh... can't really make a decision like that. We don't know the scope of the enemy. But, to ensure the security of the capital, I would suggest leaving at least fifty thousand here.”

It was unknown how many troops Germania had invested in the operation, but judging by past records, they would have probably sent around twenty thousand. Considering High Britannia's advanced artillery, even if the imperial army were to focus on point defense, they would need around fifty thousand soldiers to protect the capital. With those numbers, they would be able to buy enough time for their allies to gather.

“So you've come to a similar conclusion,” Latrielle murmured. “Twenty thousand...”

“But that's not enough to hold a siege. Perhaps we should surround them and cut off their supplies...”

“The imperial army has already suffered a harsh blow at High Britannia's hand. It will take a few years before we have regained the manpower to conquer Grebeauvoir head-on.”

“How about guaranteeing their safe passage to the western coast in exchange for them giving up the city?”

“Hm...” Latrielle glared at the map. It seemed that this suggestion wasn't welcomed too warmly.

“Are you worried about how the other nations will react?”

“If you understand that much, I see no need to explain it. Now

that His Majesty has passed, all eyes are gathered to see what the new Belgaria will be like. If we open with such weak-armed negotiations, we will be subject to a level of ridicule we could never recover from.”

“Then why not proceed with the twenty-thousand encirclement?”

“Our enemy easily managed to capture a base near the capital... Will folding our arms and waiting for them to surrender demonstrate the might of the Empire?”

“That is... Well, probably not...”

“We cannot show weakness. If they make light of us, the surrounding nations will flood in all at once. I cannot say whether that would spell our defeat, but it is a situation we must avoid nonetheless.”

“That certainly is a terrifying thought... We should start fostering more peaceful relations to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“But what we need right now is to show that the imperial army is alive and well. It takes time for national relations to change.”

“...Right.”

Grebeauvoir needed to be retaken—that was Latrielle’s decision, and Regis did not disagree. It would be impossible to establish peaceful relations with the surrounding countries in a matter of days, especially when they suspected that the imperial army was weakening.

Latrielle put a hand to his chest. “I intend to lead this operation.”

“Personally?!”

“Yes, and I am willing to bring the First Army. Combined with the Third Army that has lost its commander, we will be twenty thousand strong.”

“Do you intend to capture a fortified city with twenty thousand men...?”

Latrielle gave a dreadful nod. He was serious. They would presumably be up against an army of forty thousand who now not only had the latest guns and cannons but also a sturdy stronghold. There was no way he could win.

“I heard that you captured Fort Volks with a mere two thousand men.”

“We were lucky...”

Regis could feel the sweat beading beneath his uniform. He was tempted to say something along the lines of, “*That sounds like a challenging task, but I wish you luck,*” and then be on his way.

Latrielle stood, walking around the large table until he was right before Regis’s eyes. The aura he exuded was different from when the tactician had last met him; it was as though he had grown a size larger. Perhaps the mindset that he would be crowned emperor had changed him.

“I know that you are supporting Argentina to take me down,” he said bluntly.

Regis shook his head. “The princess’s goal is simply to do away with war.”

“As we are now, we have no right to speak of the future. Not when the Empire could cease to be in its entirety.”

“Right...”

Latrielle held out his right hand. It was the hand with which he gripped his sword—the hand of a knight used to fighting on the front lines. His skin was rough and calloused, his joints bulged out, and his nails were thick.

“We share a vested interest. For the Empire’s future, would you participate in a plan to recapture Grebeauvoir?”

This probably wasn’t a trick: while the Empire could only mobilize twenty thousand men, they couldn’t leave Grebeauvoir alone. Trying to negotiate peace wasn’t an option either. In order to prove themselves to the other nations, they would need to recover the city even at a numerical disadvantage. Latrielle was seeking assistance from Regis because he had actually pulled off a similar operation before.

Fanrine’s words echoed in his head.

“Regis, those who are highly evaluated are also burdened with high expectations. This fact does not change, no matter how little self-confidence one might have. Successes bring with them the anticipation of even further successes. It is just as unavoidable as failures being scorned.”

Latrielle went on. “A large number of civilians live in Grebeauvoir, and I presume they didn’t have the time to evacuate. Lives will be saved if we make haste.”

“Urh...”

“I am not trying to change your position. You will remain with the Fourth Army. Your transfer will merely be temporary, for this mission alone, and once we have recovered Grebeauvoir, I will arrange for you to be returned to Fort Volks at once. Your promotion and conferment can be done on the battlefield.”

“Is that true?”

“I am the marshal general and second prince. I have enough authority.”

“Um... what about the practical exam?”

“How could any weak soldiers possibly exist in an army that reclaimed a fortified city with only twenty thousand men?”

“I might not be able to propose the sort of splendid plan that you’re expecting...”

“Just promise that you’ll do your best as a staff officer—that’s enough for me. If things don’t work out, then my own poor foresight is

to blame.”

Regis would apparently be treated as a staff officer, a position greater than what even a third-grade administrative officer deserved. His adjutant Germain, for reference, was a first-grade.

Being exempt from the practical exam was, of course, a huge bonus, but more importantly, Latrielle wasn't wrong when he said that many lives were on the line. Regis didn't know whether his presence would be of any use, but... working alongside Latrielle as a staff officer would surely give him a better idea of the man's intentions than snooping around outside.

If their attempt to reclaim Grebeauvoir proved successful, it would raise Latrielle's reputation, but it was already a bit late to be worrying about that. Even a failure wouldn't be enough to eradicate his chances of taking the throne.

Working as Latrielle's staff officer would no doubt be Regis's best opportunity to learn about the second prince's future plans. It was the perfect position to glean the information he needed to guide Altina.

And so, Regis came to his decision. “I can't guarantee that I'll be of any use to you, but... I'll do everything in my power to help,” he said, holding out his right hand.

“You have my gratitude.”

Latrielle's large hand grabbed his own. In it, Regis could feel the strength of *La Dame Blanche*, the great white mountain.



Interlude

The sun beat down so hard that one could build up a sweat just from walking a few steps; it was as though summer had come a little early.

Altina led her trusty steed Caracarla along the path, glancing back again and again. *Should I have them rest?* she thought to herself. The soldiers were dead tired, their staggering steps making it seem as though they could collapse at any moment.

And yet their expressions exuded vigor.

They would soon be at Fort Volks—their home base they had been away from for over a month now. Once they reached their destination, they would be able to bathe, sleep in a bed, and enjoy the flavors they had grown accustomed to.

Even while being worked to the bone, the soldiers were as cheerful as could be.

Altina was mulling things over—she had been for a while now. Had Regis been with them, he would have adjusted their schedule to the new situation. Thinking back on it now, she had left almost everything to him.

Someone like Jerome would have been able to make the proper calls just by looking at his soldiers, but Altina had no prior knowledge or experience to draw from. They were on the way back from a long expedition, and the weather was strangely harsh for the time of year. It seemed only natural that the soldiers would be better off with some extra rest, and yet they were adamant about pressing on to return as soon as possible.

Despite how much she had thought it over, the march approached its end before she was able to make a decision. The rests they had ended up taking were ones Regis had scheduled before their departure. He hadn't known about the weather, so they were short, few, and far between.

Altina would ask the soldiers what they wanted to do, of course, but they would simply respond with, "We're all right!" What else could they say?

There were seven thousand carrying weapons, a considerable number of whom were also helping to pull the cannons along. Many were growing ill and fatigued, and some shouldered the wounds of consecutive battles.

The number of soldiers who had to drop out and cram into the relief carriage, no longer able to keep up with the march, was greater than usual.

Should we rest? Should we go on?

But as Altina continued to ponder, a soldier in the vanguard raised a shout. "I can see the fortress!"

"Hurraaah!" the troops all cheered.

The merriment all around lulled Altina into a smile as well. Beneath it, however, her irritation about her lack of experience as a commander grew a little stronger.

Thankfully, the feeling proved to be rather short-lived. *At least I have one experience now!* she thought. Such optimism came quite naturally to her.

Those from Fort Volks had initially marched out as the Beilschmidt border regiment with four thousand troops, and now they returned as the Fourth Army with close to double their original numbers.

There were already soldiers rushing out to greet them; the messenger had gone ahead to inform them that the expedition was soon to return. Leading them on horseback was a man called Everard: a muscular knight who captained the fortress's garrison. While he was already over fifty years old, he showed as much vigor as ever.

"Princess!"

"Everard! It's been too long!"

"Good work—*splendid* work, even—on returning unscathed!"

As soon as Everard reached Altina, he dismounted his horse and kneeled. His bald cue ball head hadn't changed, but there was now a peppering of white mixed into what had once been a splendid black beard. It had only been a month, but perhaps he had experienced his own share of troubles.

Altina likewise dismounted. "You kept the fortress safe in my absence. Thank you."

"Your words are more than I deserve."

The fortress's soldiers soon caught up, the ground practically trembling beneath their stampede. Their stomps were interspersed with cries of joy at their comrades' triumphant return.

The Beilschmidt border regiment had originally been an army stationed at the capital, so there were some who had acquaintances in the Second Army. This made for some rather surprised reunions.

And of course, there were tears shed for those who hadn't made it back.

Altina looked over the soldiers and nodded. "They're not just numbers... They're people."

"Is something the matter, Princess?"

“We lost close to a thousand of the soldiers who marched with us from Volks. Soldiers who had friends and family.”

“I heard that High Britannia had some brand-new weapon nobody had ever seen before. Both the Second and Seventh Armies were defeated, and Prince Latrielle was injured. I also heard that the enemy army was but a stone’s throw from the capital. We should rejoice that you brought even three thousand back from such a harsh war.”

“Right... I need to look forward. I even said the same thing to Regis.”

“Feeling a sense of responsibility and mourning the dead aren’t bad things, by any means. I know it may have been presumptuous of me, but seeing as you’re not on the battlefield anymore, I prepared a little celebration for your victory. Just meat and ale, though.”

“Hah... Thanks. We should hurry before it gets cold, then!”

The two mounted their horses again and rode along together. When the bugle sounded, the soldiers started to march shoulder to shoulder, singing cheerful songs of war and the Empire.

“...Hey, where’s Eric?” Altina asked.

Everard had been smiling up to that point, but his expression suddenly turned grim. It had taken only an instant for someone always overflowing with youth and energy to become as weary as an old man.



Soon after she was back inside the fortress, Altina spotted a swordsman in a black robe and a young man with silver hair descending the stairs.

“Yo, Argentina!” Eddie called out. “Finally back?”

“I am glad you’re all right,” Auguste added.

She dressed in male clothing around the soldiers, but Auguste was actually Fifth Princess Felicia.



Altina greeted them with a raised hand as a large, canopied wagon passed through the gates. Clarisse stepped out from inside and offered them all a courteous bow.

Eddie tilted his head. "Hold up. Where's Regis?"

"He had to go off on his own to get a promotion and a title conferred on him. Something like that..."

"I see. Makes sense, given everything he's done."

"Good grief, though! It just had to be when Germania might invade!"

"Not like there's ever a peaceful moment in the Empire."

"You have a point, but..."

The soldiers were growing rowdy as they left their horses to rest and started carrying the injured to the infirmary. Altina determined it would probably be fine to leave things to Everard and started heading to her room, making her way up the long staircase with the others.

"So, Eddie, Felicia—have you been in good health?"

"Never caught a cold in my life."

"My apologies... I did catch a minor one."

Once the soldiers were out of earshot, Felicia dropped her act to reveal the face of a timid young girl. It was a stark contrast to the awe-inspiring sense of dignity she gave off as Auguste—a testament to her magnificent acting skills.

Eddie scratched his head. "Ah, well... It ain't your fault, Felicia. It's been one cold day after another."

"You think so...?"

"If only I could protect you from illnesses too. Still, feel free to rely on me whenever you're feeling under the weather."

"Yeah... Thank you. I already am relying on you. I always am."

"I'll make sure to warm you up on those cold days."

Felicia's cheeks turned a gentle red. "I look forward to that..."

In what seemed like a very uncharacteristic turn of events, Eddie returned a warm smile, a particular gentleness in his eyes.

Altina was starting to feel strangely restless. *Am I getting in the way of something?* she wondered with a quiet sigh. As she looked away from the pair, her gaze landed on Clarisse, who was walking a few steps behind and to the side of them.

"Hey, Clarisse..."

"What might be the matter, Princess?"

"When do you reckon Regis will be back?"

"I am told it will be somewhere between a week and a month from now. Please do remember that even once his business at the capital is complete, the journey here will take him quite some time. I would estimate no less than six days, and hopefully no longer than

thirty.”

“Yeah, that’s about what I was expecting... Hah... I should have gone with him.”

“What are you talking about?” Eddie interjected with a wry smile on his face. “A commander can’t just up and leave her unit. Or were you planning to take the whole army with you?”

“Hmph... I know it wasn’t really an option, but... when I look at you and Felicia, I get this sudden urge to see Regis’s face! I just can’t put my finger on why, though...”

“Hmm? That is strange...” Eddie seemed equally perplexed.

Her already flushed cheeks turning even redder, Felicia stumbled over her words. “D-Does that mean...? Oh, Sis...”

Clarisse contributed an incredibly faint sigh. “Oh dear...” she muttered under her breath.

Altina parted with Eddie and Felicia upon reaching her room.

Once she had settled in, she decided she would wipe down her body. She sat in the center of a shallow tub as Clarisse soaked a cloth in a jug of warm water, lightly wrung it out, and then pressed it against her bare skin.

It was a soft, warm sensation.

“Phew...”

“Your skin truly is beautiful.”

“You think so? I wouldn’t say it’s any different from yours, Clarisse.”

“Hehe. I appreciate the compliment, Princess, but your skin glistens like a gemstone while also maintaining a supple springiness. It looks delicious, even.”

“N-No biting...”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about me. But the time may come, someday... Hah. Just imagine it, my princess...”

“Are you suggesting that I’m going to get bitten? You’ve got to be kidding me. No matter who I’m up against, I’d never be that careless.”

“Mm... Yes, you could call it carelessness.”

“Huh?”

“Mwahaha... It seems I won’t need to worry for some time yet. You really are a princess after all, Princess.”

“Huuuh?”

Clarisse continued scrubbing Altina with strangely high spirits. The princess’s fatigue from the expedition seemed to wash away along with the grime, and soon enough, she was seated in front of the dresser while Clarisse combed her hair. She had been away for so long that the simple pleasure made her feel almost nostalgic, and before she knew it, a smile had spread across her lips.

“Hm... Ehehe...”

“Have I accidentally tickled you?” Clarisse asked.

“No, that’s not it. Maybe it’s just homesickness...”

“I see.”

“Hey, Clarisse... You’re going to stay with me forever, right?”

“Of course. But Mr. Regis will be back before you know it too.”

“Wh-Who said anything about Regis? He’s coming back. Of course he is. He promised.”

Clarisse went on to apply a thin layer of oil to Altina’s hair and skin, giving them an alluring sheen. The princess recoiled; this time, it really was a little ticklish.



The celebration banquet was held that evening.

Those who had stayed behind during the war, those who had marched out on the expedition, and the newcomers who had come back with them all drank and made merry. Their coordination in battle could only be improved through rigorous training, but perhaps more personal connections such as these were necessary for them to truly rally under one banner.

Together, the soldiers rejoiced at the lives saved and mourned the ones lost. The feast carried on late into the night and would probably continue until early the next morning.

That night—

Having not seen him at the banquet either, Altina decided to pay Eric a visit. The lady doctor had mentioned that his wounds were already healed, so he would be found not in the infirmary but in his own room.

She knocked on the door.

“Yes...?” came a response.

Altina took a deep breath. “It’s me. Do you have a moment?”

“Eh?! Princess?!” The voice had become noticeably shrill.

The princess heard the pitter-patter of hurried footsteps and then the *click* of a latch being moved before the door was thrown open. It was nighttime, and yet the wide-eyed Eric was still wearing his usual leather clothes.

Altina chuckled. “Sorry for dropping by at this hour. It was a real pain, you know, sneaking out of the celebration... Were you asleep?”

“Perish the thought!”

The faint glow of a flickering flame seeped out from inside the room. The moon was usually the only light source for those awake at such an hour, but as Fort Volks was a former mine, there were no

windows to allow for proper lighting. To make up for this, the soldiers used torches in the larger rooms and candles in smaller spaces.

"I wish to talk," Altina said. "Is now a good time?"

"C-Certainly! I'll get changed and head to the audience chamber at once!"

"You really don't have to do that. But I would rather not have this conversation out in the corridor..."

The hallway carried sound like a speaking tube.

Eric stepped back and dropped down on one knee, finally granting Altina entrance. "To welcome the princess into a place like this..." he murmured.

"Well, the doctor said your wound was all better, right? So when I didn't see you out and about, I started to wonder if something had happened."

"Erk... M-My apologies! Under normal circumstances, I should have dropped everything to come and pay my respects!"

"That's all right. I've received so many congratulations by this point that I'm sick of them. It's not like we won with my strength alone... More importantly, though, I'm worried about you."

Still kneeling down, Eric lowered his gaze to the floor. A non-commissioned fifth-grade combat officer like him would normally be assigned to a large room shared with several others, yet he had been granted one all to himself as Altina's guard officer. It came with a small desk by the bed as well.

As they were now, if Altina sat on the bed, she would need to look down at Eric as they conversed. Back when she had intruded into Regis's room, he would allow her to take the chair while sitting on the bed himself.

Now that she thought about it, Regis was a fifth-grade officer as well. It wouldn't have been strange for him to humble himself and freeze up just as Eric was doing now.

He really is a strange person... Altina thought to herself. But that didn't matter now. She dragged the chair by the desk over to the bed and took a seat.

"Eric, it's hard to speak to you when you're like that. Sit on the bed, why don't you?"

"Me?! I-I couldn't..."

"There's no need to keep up appearances when nobody's watching. I didn't come here to be kowtowed to; I came to talk."

"My apologies..."

Eric seemed reverent and reserved as he perched on the edge of the bed, which had been newly purchased upon the capture of the fortress. It was not a simple sheet of cloth laid over a base of straw, but a layered fabric stretched out over an innerspring mattress. This

sort of luxury was normally reserved for commissioned officers.

The bed creaked lightly beneath Eric's weight. He had already been a man who paid more thought to decorum than the others, but never to such an excessive extent.

There must be an explanation, Altina thought. It was presumably the same reason Everard had suddenly looked so troubled back when she arrived.

"So, *has* something happened?" she asked, cutting straight to the point. She hated needless beating around the bush.

"Urgh..." Eric groaned.

"Is it something that you can't tell me?"

"N-No! Not at all!" he hurriedly replied. Transparent droplets were starting to well up in his eyes, and his shoulders shook ever so slightly.

Altina silently awaited his words. She wasn't a child anymore; she could exercise patience if she needed to, especially for the sake of a subordinate.

The quivering reached Eric's lips. "M-My left hand..."

"Yes, I heard that your injuries have healed."

A few tears began to trickle down his cheeks. "I... I can't continue... as a knight anymore," he choked, gritting his teeth as he held out his trembling left hand. "I can't put... any strength into it."

Altina reached out and gently took his hand. It was slender and pale, almost like that of a noblewoman, and there were no visible wounds on it.

"Try to squeeze my fingers," she said.

Eric looked miserable as he obliged. His grip truly was no better than a limp handshake. He was exerting enough strength to perhaps lift a cup of tea, but a heavy weapon was completely out of the question.

A knight was a mounted soldier: they needed to hold a spear in one hand and their horse's reins in the other. As he was now, it would be impossible for him to fight on horseback.

More and more tears began to stream down the young man's face. "E-Erk... Hic... That's... That's all I can manage..."

"I see..."

"I can only muster as much strength as a child... I can't fight like this... I can't even serve as a shield... I'll only get in the way..." he murmured, struggling to contain his despairing whimpers.

Altina gripped his hand back, trying to use just as little force. "B-But the lady doctor said it would take two months for your muscles..."

Eric shook his head. "That's not it... Not exactly... That was about my shoulder, which is getting better, but... My fingers..."

Altina was no longer a stranger to the battlefield, so this wasn't

her first time looking after a wounded soldier. She had seen similar cases before—men who could barely use their hands or feet after sustaining an injury to the shoulder or back. The muscles in their limbs hadn't been wounded, and yet they couldn't move their fingers or stand. The cause was unknown, and there was currently no way of treating it.

For Eric, his condition probably wouldn't be too much of an inconvenience in his everyday life, at least not once he grew used to it. But there was no way he could continue to serve as a standard soldier, let alone a guard officer.

Altina continued to grip his hand, suddenly overcome with worry. She didn't know what to say.

"Waaah... Princess... I-I'm sorry... I'm... useless now..." Eric sobbed, his shoulders shaking even harder as he squeezed the words from his chest. He was in no state to stand in battle or even carry supplies; in fact, under normal circumstances, he would have already been sent home by now. But was that really all right? Regis had told Altina before that, without Eric, he would have been dead.

"Th-That's right. Regis might just..."

"Pardon...?" Eric asked, wiping his teary eyes with his right sleeve.

Altina reached out, now using both hands to comfortably envelop Eric's left. "I'm sorry. What I'm about to say might be a little insensitive—it might be irresponsible and selfish, and it might even frustrate you... But I really do think you're a reliable guard officer."

"P-Princess...?"

"Regis said it was only because of your advice that he worked out Auguste's true identity. You're the one who prepared the horses for us to get away, and when I fought Franziska, you're the one who saved his life."

"I-Is that true?"

"I don't want to lose you, Eric. I'll try consulting with the lady doctor. She's only just returned, so she hasn't gotten a proper look at you yet, right?"

"Th-That's true, but... she'll just say it'll be a long time before I recover—assuming I ever do, that is."

"I'll wait however long it takes. Regis might even know something that can help."

"But if Mr. Regis sees me like this... won't he lose faith in me...?" Eric asked, looking at the princess fearfully.

Altina shook her head with all her might. "Absolutely not! That would never happen! There's no way Regis would abandon you! I-I'm certain! Yes, of course! He'll say something like, 'I've read about this in a book before!'"

“Do you really think so...?”

“Absolutely.”

Eric lowered his eyes and sighed. “But... Mr. Regis hasn’t stopped by my room, or the infirmary... Hasn’t he forgotten about me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! He’s gone to the capital for a promotion or something!”

“Eh?!”

“Nobody told you?! Actually... on second thought, I guess that’s something you’d never find out unless you asked. He wanted to know how your recovery was going. Ah, that reminds me—I promised that I’d write to him.”

“Writing? You...?” Eric asked, once again wiping his eyes. This time, however, he had a dubious look on his face.

Altina scowled. “What? Is the thought of me writing letters really that strange?”

“I-I didn’t say that! It’s just... I’ve never even seen you hold a pen before.”

“I can at least manage a few letters. I promised to send him one every day.”

“Every day?!” Eric exclaimed. His eyes were wide as plates, his shock so immense that he even seemed to have forgotten his own circumstances.

Is this really that surprising? I feel a bit insulted...

“Y-Yes, every day. And my first one will be about you, Eric.”

“I-I’m honored. Every day... That truly is astounding... I once heard Mr. Regis lament about you trying to avoid doing something as simple as signing documents that absolutely required your signature...”

“Erp.”

Altina averted her gaze. She wasn’t a particularly bad writer, but she couldn’t think of anything worse than being stuck behind a desk, moving nothing but her hands.

Eric reverently lowered his head. “Thank you, Princess. For you to have shown so much concern for me... That alone makes the time I once spent as a knight worthwhile.”

“Oh, for crying out loud! You’re still a knight! I haven’t given up yet—not on changing the Empire, and not on you!”

Judging by the look on his face, Eric was clearly bewildered. Altina was sure he had already heard about the passing of the emperor, but perhaps Latrielle’s proclamation had yet to reach his ears. They were on the farthest border, after all.

Altina sat back down and fell into thought. Right now, her main priority was her letter to Regis. “Err... What should I start with...?” she mused aloud.

Then, there was a knock at the door.

“Who could that be?” Eric muttered to himself as he stood, prompting Altina to finally release her grip on him. His right hand hovered above his sword as he creaked open the door.

In the doorway stood a maid with a friendly smile on her face. She was carrying a tray, on top of which was a pristine tea set.

“I thought the letter writing might take a while, so would you care for some extra sweet tea to keep you up?”

“Huh... Ms. Clarisse...”

“Aha! Good thinking!” Altina exclaimed, happily beckoning the maid inside. “You couldn’t have come at a better time; we’ll all write the letter together!”

“Oh, that does sound fun.”

Eric cocked his head. “Is that really okay though? Wasn’t the promise that the *princess* would write a letter every single day?”

“Erk... Th-That doesn’t matter! Remember this, okay? Relying on your comrades is important in any situation. Challenging someone you have no chance of winning against to a duel, and charging the enemy alone isn’t courageous—it’s foolish,” she explained, holding up a finger and speaking in a very Regis-like tone.

Eric and Clarisse exchanged a brief glance before bursting into fits of giggles.

Why are they laughing?! Altina thought, puffing out her cheeks in frustration.

Chapter 4: A Meeting of Shooting Stars

“Bastian! I found a carriage!”

“Finally!”

Elize was rarely late to their arranged meeting points, but as Bastian wondered what could have happened to her, she returned with wonderful news. Her blonde hair bounced as she raced over. Perhaps she was considerably excited, as she was short of breath when she reached him.

“Hah... Hah... They’re parked a little farther down the byroad. The owner said they didn’t mind taking us to the capital!”

“Wow! I guess we really lucked out!”

They were currently in Wollalen, a town 20 lieue south of the capital. High Britannia had invaded from west to east, then fled north, meaning the region had not been touched by the flames of war. This had also resulted in the area being flooded with refugees who had feared being dragged into the conflict.

The inns were all fully booked, and so a great number of people were camping out on the outskirts of the town, either in tents or just with sheets wrapped around them.

Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria had once hidden his identity to study abroad in High Britannia, while Elize was actually the High Britannian princess Elizabeth Victoria. She had been named as the late queen’s successor, only for Margaret Stillart to take the crown instead and send the army to claim her life.

One thing had led to another, and she was now traveling with Bastian.

Two months prior, High Britannia had declared war on Belgaria. The High Britannian populace were initially elated at the news, and they would go on to celebrate victory after victory—that is, until the Queen’s Navy was defeated in Ciennbourg. From that point onward, they had suffered a stream of consecutive defeats.

By now, every soul in High Britannia knew the names of the fourth princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria and her tactician Regis d’Aurick.

High Britannia’s defeats brought with them fear, paranoia, and a worsening of public order. Discrimination against Belgarians flared to the point that those living there feared for their lives. This, coupled

with the warrant for his and Elize's arrest, spurred Bastian to return to Belgaria, taking the young princess along with him. Another friend by the name of Roland was supposed to have accompanied them, but his notes were now all they had to remember him by.

After four days on a swaying ship, weaving their way through High Britannia's security net, they had somehow arrived at a southwestern port. A messenger from Roland's house had been waiting for them there, and Bastian had needed to deliver the sad news.

Despite their disappointment, the messenger still offered to take Bastian and Elize under House Tirasio Laverde's protection. There was still a desire budding within Bastian, though. It was a vague emotion that he couldn't quite pin down, but he knew he couldn't just hide away in a distant land.

Bastian was the sort of person who immediately acted on any thought that came to him. And so, the two were headed for the capital.

Elize shared his perspective. "Instead of cowering in idleness, I'd rather learn all I can about the Empire."

They had hitched a ride on a carriage headed in the right direction, blessed by fine weather on the first stretch of their journey, but that fortune only brought them as far as Wollalen. The situation there was nothing out of the ordinary: the area around the capital was a battlefield, and while the war situation was currently unknown, tensions were high enough that slews of people had fled and taken refuge.

The sight of so many refugees eliminated any incentive for their original carriage to continue, so the two had been searching for a new lift from morning to sunset. Bastian had started to believe that walking would be their only option—that is, until Elize found a driver crazy enough to take them.



This is awful. The worst. The absolute worst. Where did we go wrong? When we joined forces with those damned High Britannians? When we agreed to guard those supplies? When we attacked the Fourth Army's base? It was all going so well... It's like I've dropped a first-class meal right into the dirt. No, my biggest misstep was failing to take out that Belgarian princess...

"Dammit..." Franziska sighed.

"Fran...? Are you all right?"

She had been glaring at the ground, muttering to herself, so it was understandable that someone was worried about her.

"I'm always right as rain. I can walk, I can breathe, and I'm cute as all hell."

"I see... Talk to the ground too long, though, and a nasty faerie will pop out."

"I don't see any."

"Oh dear. You should stop before it is too late, then. They will snatch your soul away, you know."

"Gwuh?!"

"Keep your eyes straight ahead."

The woman capable of saying such things with a straight face was her sister Jessica. Her light hair, ghostly pale skin, and slender limbs made it hard to imagine her as a mercenary, but she was a bona fide member of Renard Pendu, known by her comrades as "the Magician."

Their last travel companion was Martina, the youngest sister. She was a mere ten years old, and she looked even younger than that. The braids she wore on both sides were apparently her attempt to imitate Franziska.

"You're very cute, Sis."

"Yay! That's a good girl! You're super cute too, Martina!"

Franziska ruffled Martina's hair, her little sister's eyes crinkling into a smile as though she were being tickled.

The three girls walked together down the highland path.

A thick fog had set in that night even though it hadn't rained, and the High Britannian supply unit had lost their advantage even with the newest guns at hand. They had been devastated by the enemy's cavalry.

With their vision obscured, Gilbert had determined it would no longer be possible to protect the supplies, instead deciding to lead his elites to charge the enemy base. Their foe numbered sixteen thousand, and even if they had assumed half those troops had been sent out to attack, that still left eight thousand at camp. Gilbert, in contrast, had had a mere three hundred men at his disposal.

This plan was more hopeless than any that had come before it.

Franziska would have joined them, of course, had Gilbert not given her a strict order: "Escort the other two to the rendezvous point, then wait there."

"Why?! I can fight too!"

"I know you can! That's why I'm trusting you to protect them!"

Gilbert wasn't taking no for an answer. He was serious, and there had been no time to argue. Meanwhile, her mercenary comrades had smiled at her in ways that didn't suit them at all.

"You take care of our magician, Franziska."

"Protect that sister of yours."

"We'll win and be right back. Have a meal waiting!"

To hell with that! I ain't your wife, and I ain't your mama, neither!

“Have a meal waiting”? Don’t screw with me! I’m only doing this because my brother ordered me to!

Franziska cursed at the men as she saw them off. She knew this was the last she would see of many of them, but surely Gilbert would be able to pull it off. This hopeless plan would succeed—she truly believed that.

But reality didn’t run on fairy tale logic.

The plan failed, and Gilbert was captured...

The famed mercenary brigade known as Renard Pendu was annihilated, and with her sorrow clear in her eyes, Franziska was forced to lead her two sisters onward from the rendezvous point.

Now they walked down a road with no end in sight. On foot, they chased after the Fourth Army that had captured their brother, following the countless footsteps and wheel tracks they left wherever they went.

A vast forest spread out to their left.

Franziska sighed. “Hey... Shouldn’t we go save him already?”

If she were on her own at night, Franziska was confident she could make it to Gilbert without being spotted, and once he was released, he would be able to free their captured comrades. There was no doubt in her mind they would be able to get away.

But Jessica shook her head. “You will only be throwing your life away.”

She could tell the future by looking at the stars. She had always foreseen their fortune in this very war to be *sinister*, but there hadn’t been any civil wars in Germania large enough to warrant Renard Pendu’s involvement, and the rewards High Britannia offered were quite enticing.

Mercenaries made their livings by constantly leaping into danger, so even now, Franziska did not think Gilbert had made the wrong decision. But nothing good ever came from ignoring Jessica’s predictions.

“Urgh... But if we just keep following them, they’ll eventually reach the capital... and that’s where Gil is going to be...”

The imperial army hanged all captured mercenaries. Following that trend, Gilbert might be executed as well—something Franziska very much wanted to avoid.

Martina was visibly anxious, while Jessica looked up at the sky. The sun still glistened in the west, glowering at their backs and stretching their shadows a great distance ahead. Of course, Jessica couldn’t see the stars right now, but she nodded nonetheless.

“...This is the right path,” she said.

“How d’you know that?!”

“The stars are telling me... to follow our brother.”

“There isn’t a star in the sky, but *wow*, they’re apparently talking to you! Ah, by God! I’ve had enough of your fortune-telling!”

“...It is astrology, a legitimate field of study.”

“Hah.”

“You need to pep up, Sis,” Martina chimed in.

Franziska sighed. “Martina, you’re my only comfort now.”

“There is no need to worry,” Jessica tried to reassure her frustrated sister. “Princess Argentina will not have our brother hanged.”

“And what are you basing *that* on? Did the stars tell you that too?”

“If she wanted him dead, she could have had him executed the day after his capture... The fact he is still alive surely means that she wishes to recruit him. Brother, and Renard Pendu... The fourth princess is in the midst of a power struggle with the second prince. She is at a disadvantage... She needs strength.”

Jessica was not just skilled at divination—she was an excellent tactician as well. That was why, impatient as she was, Franziska refrained from sneaking into the Fourth Army’s camp.

“Mn...?”

Franziska suddenly heard hoofbeats coming from up ahead.

Imperial scouts?

She heightened her senses, and that was when she noticed the noise was coming from behind them as well.

“Tsk... We’re surrounded!”

She reached for the small crossbow hung at her hip and got into position, swiftly loading a bolt.

“What’s wrong?” Jessica asked, tilting her head. She could read the distant future but was rather oblivious when it came to immediate danger.

An army patrol wouldn’t pincer them on a highway, nor was this a place one would encounter travelers or peddlers.

“Bandits!” Franziska spat.

“Eek?!” Fearful as she was, Martina reached for her knife. She was a child, but still an apprentice mercenary trained by the fearless elites of Renard Pendu, so she could hold her own against a normal soldier.

But not when outnumbered.

The thunder of hooves made it clear that there were a great number of horses. Franziska wasn’t confident she could fend them off while protecting both Jessica and Martina.

“Run into the forest!”

“...They are probably lurking in the forest as well,” Jessica commented.

Franziska tried to sense their presence, but she couldn’t detect

anything. "Where?! Whereabouts?!"

"...Fran, how am I supposed to sense someone when *you* are unable to? I do not know, but they are there."

"This is no time to mess around...!"

They appeared from down the road, riding horses. They really were bandits. At the same time, she could hear someone coming from the depths of the forest.

She was right! Franziska cursed to herself. Despite these being petty thugs, they had successfully laid an ambush, having anticipated that the girls would flee into the woods. She didn't sense anyone to their right, but that was a region of endless hills where a horse would quickly catch up no matter how fast they ran.

"Tsk..."

There were around thirty bandits. They had really pulled out all the stops just to surround three young women.

Franziska glared at her foes. She didn't have enough bolts for the task.

Shit. Shit. Shit. This ain't good!

There were more than twice as many enemies as there were bolts in her quiver. Had she been alone, she could have stolen one of their horses and then shot down those who pursued her, but Jessica was unable to ride, and Martina was still practicing.

"Look at that!" Franziska exclaimed. "Your divination really is a scam! Who's the one who said we should keep following Gil?!"

"How strange..."

"Your head is what's strange!"

One of the horses brayed—a conspicuously large steed, from which a well-built bearded man lorded over them. He had scars on his face that made for the perfect features of a seasoned mercenary.

So he's the leader.

The man exhaled deeply. Franziska was sure she could smell his foul breath even despite the distance between them.

"Hah, I knew it," he sneered. "You're Renard Pendu!"

"Huh?!"

Franziska's eyes widened in shock. *They know us?!*

The man's lips curled into a grin. "We were in the same camp once, back when I was in Germana. The moment I heard you stuck-up pricks lost to the Empire, I thought I'd show a bit of patriotism by hunting down your remnants. Looks like I hit the jackpot!"

His henchmen raised vulgar laughs.

What patriotism?! You're just a beast slaughtering battered mercs to steal their coin! Franziska screamed internally. Her head was filled with a stream of verbal abuse.

Their situation really was the worst: they were up against former

mercenaries turned bandits, more than she had bolts for, and it didn't seem like the men were going to let their guards down just because they were dealing with women.

To think this was where Renard Pendu's notoriety would rear its ugly head...

Should I take the chief hostage? No, there's no guarantee his men actually value him. What if they turn a blade on Jessica and Martina while I'm busy? A sudden shiver ran down her spine. *Wait, they're aiming at Martina?!*

"Not on my watch!"

Franziska stepped forward to protect her, but the bandits simply burst into laughter again. Even the chief was gripping his stomach as he kindly reminded her of the situation.

"You sure about that? We're shooting from behind too."

"Kuh?!"

One of the bandits behind them raised his bow. As expected, his aim was also on Martina.

Four archers ahead, three behind. I can't cover them from everyone!

Had she been alone, she was confident she could have kept avoiding their arrows until she had taken out every archer with her crossbow. But as they were now, no matter what she did, Martina would be shot before she could take out the last one.

Her trigger finger quivered. She had hardly moved, yet it was painful to breathe.

"S-Sto... Stop!" Franziska begged. "Don't take any more of my family away!"

"Oh, piss off, mercenary! Those soldiers you killed had families too, right? What makes you any better than them?!"

"Urgh..."

"Throw down that weapon of yours! We'll spare your life, if nothing else!"

"Khh..."

Franziska could feel her eyes heating up out of sheer irritation, but she had no way of resisting them. She set her loaded crossbow down by her feet, raising her hands in surrender.

Martina clung to her, on the verge of tears. "S-Sis..."

"I'm sorry... Really sorry... Gil told me to protect you, but... in the end... I couldn't do a thing..."

Jessica looked up at the sky, her expression even more indecipherable than usual. It seemed that not even the Magician could think up some brilliant plan to reverse their fate.

What now? Are we gonna be put to grunt work? Sold to the army?

The chief snorted. "Clothes off, while you're at it."

"Hah?!"

“You got a problem? How about we just kill you then, one by one?”

“Son of a bitch...!”

When she looked at this man, Franziska felt a stronger impulse to murder than she had ever experienced in her life. It was like there were firecrackers violently exploding in her head.

The chief narrowed his eyes, then looked at one of the other bandits. “Hey, shoot the small one.”

His subordinate gleefully laughed as he readied his bow. Martina raised a fearful shriek, and Franziska could do nothing but scream.

“Quit it, would you?!” she cried.

“You need to learn where you stand in all this, mercenary. Do you realize what you’ve gotta do? Well, do you?!”

“Kuh... Erk... I-I do!”

She removed her light armor, which fell to the ground with a *clang*. Tugging on a single cord was enough for her sleeves to detach, laying her arms bare. The bandits’ leering eyes repulsed her.

I’ll shoot ’em straight through the eye sockets, she swore to herself.

She loosened the ribbon on her chest. Once the lace running down her back had come free, her dress slumped to the ground in one hefty motion.

The bandits jeered like savages at the sight of her undergarments. She could feel a sense of danger much different from that of the battlefield—it was as though there were bugs skittering all over her body.

Her shoulders trembled not out of humiliation but hatred. She had clamped her teeth down so hard on her bottom lip that the taste of blood spread through her mouth.

“My apologies...” Jessica whispered. “It has arrived a little later than expected.”

“What?”

Franziska hadn’t the time to contemplate her sister’s cryptic words, but the presence of something racing through the forest suddenly restored her composure.

What now?!

It couldn’t possibly be human; it tore through the trees faster than Renard Pendu’s most agile mercenary. Whatever it was, it didn’t so much as hesitate as it plunged straight into the bandit encirclement.

What had appeared before them was a young man with brown hair, his eyes blazing a brilliant crimson. He looked to be around sixteen—no older than Franziska—and yet he moved so fast that it seemed everything around him had been frozen in time.

Perhaps because they had been so busy jeering Franziska about her predicament, the bandits only noticed the mysterious figure when

he was already standing right in their midst. The crimson-eyed man took his position beside the sisters.

“The hell are you doing?!” shouted the chief.

“That’s what I should be asking you!” the crimson-eyed man replied. “Surrounding a girl like this and humiliating her... I’ll hear you out before I smack you, so out with it!”

It wasn’t long before the bandits were laughing again. The chief’s stomach trembled as he said, “Our reason? Well, you see... We’re bandits, you fool! What can you do alone?! You came here to die!”

Franziska grit her teeth. For a moment, the man’s superhuman movements had given her hope, but... their situation hadn’t changed. It was still hopeless if they were going to be fired upon from all sides, and their opponent knew this too.

“All right, boys! We don’t need the man! Get him!”

One of the bandits nocked an arrow...

“Ghh—?!”

Then immediately coughed up blood.

What was that...?!

The man had been right before them all just a moment ago, and yet a majority of the bandits still hadn’t been able to register it. Franziska had just barely managed to catch what had happened—the man had thrown something.

There was a fruit knife embedded in the chest of the blood-spewing bandit.

A throwing knife!

That in itself wasn’t too unusual, but he had thrown it such a considerable distance and with such speed that she couldn’t help but be taken aback.

The crimson-eyed man coldly glared at the men on horseback. “I won’t hold back to protect someone. If my enemies are out for blood, I’ve got the resolve to kill them.”

Rather than speaking to the bandits, it sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

“Well, don’t just stand there!” cried the chief. “Kill him!”

The order was enough to spur the bandits into action, but no sooner had they drawn their bows than another knife shot through the air. This time, the target was wiser; he covered his vitals, only to take a second knife to the throat a beat later.

It was as if the man had a grasp on the movements of everyone there. The bowmen had him pincerred on two sides—four ahead, three behind—but before they could even nock any arrows, the man had thrown eight knives.

At this point, not even Franziska could keep up; neither her brother Gilbert nor the current Duke Balzac had been this fast. Knives

were said to be the swiftest weapon, but even still, this was an abnormal level of speed.

Franziska was the one being saved, and yet a shudder still ran down her spine. She was not the sort of girl to allow such a display to entrance her, though; she kicked up her crossbow, squeezing the trigger the moment it was in her grasp.

A needle-like bolt flew at the chief's head.

“Gah?!”

The man was thrown from his horse, blood streaming behind him as he somersaulted through the air. A bolt had pierced through his eye and into his brain; Franziska had made good on her vow.

The rest of the bandits screamed and fled at once. *I'll hunt every last one of you!* Franziska thought, slamming a second bolt into her crossbow, but her enemies already had one up on her—the bandits spurred their horses, while those who weren't mounted ran into the forest.

In no time at all, they were gone.



“Thank you, mister!” came a small voice. A little girl was suddenly clinging on to him.

“Whoa there?!”

Bastian was clearly flustered—not by the hug, but by the fact that such a small child had managed to take him by surprise.

“Ehe he he! I'm Martina! Who are you?”

“My name's Bastian.”

“Thank you, Mister Bastian!”

“Are you hurt at all?”

“Nope!”

A girl around the same age as Bastian lowered her head. “Um... Th... Tha... you.”

To be blunt, he didn't quite know where he was supposed to look. He knew the woman was competent based on her crossbow skills, but as things were, he couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye.

“Yeah, yeah...” he murmured. “Just put on some clothes.”

“Hmph! Don't look then, perv! Only Gil's ever seen before...”

“I wasn't trying to look!”

He was being wary, for what it was worth, but there didn't seem to be a need. The girl picked up her dress and immediately fastened the ribbon around her, then slipped on her armor as though she had done so a hundred times before. While she dressed, the oldest looking of the three—a woman who gave off a serene impression—offered a deep bow.

“Thank you. My name is Jessica.”

“You really drew the short straw there, being surrounded by all those bandits.”

“Perhaps, but thanks to that, we ran into you, Bastian.”

“Me?” he asked, looking at her curiously.

The girl who had quickly gotten her appearance in order butted in as soon as she could. “Bastian, was it?! Did you run all the way through that forest? Are you really human? I mean, how’s anyone supposed to go that fast?!”

“Hah... I didn’t run *that* far. I was riding a carriage a bit farther down the road when I heard some horses, so I decided to scout ahead just in case, as you do. I told them to follow a short ways behind, so they should be here soon...”

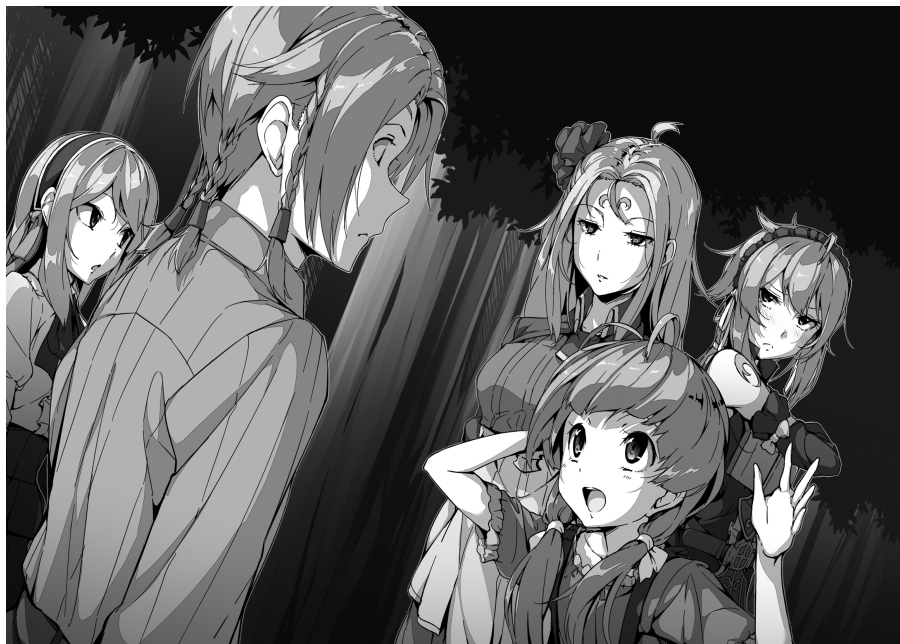
Bastian turned and squinted until, eventually, the carriage he had chartered from Wollalen came into view. Elize was leaning out from inside, fervently waving her hands. She was so desperate to see him that she jumped out the moment they were nearby, rushing over at once.

“Bastian!”

“Hey now, I’m not going anywhere.”

“U-Um... Who are they...?”

“Get this, they were surrounded by bandits...” he began, going on to explain the details.



Once again, Jessica and Martina introduced themselves. Elize responded by telling them she was an exchange student from High Britannia.

Jessica turned to the girl with the crossbow. “You too... Introduce yourself, would you?”

“Urgh... I-I know. Um... It’s Franziska. You got that?!”

“I see. Did they hurt you anywhere?”

“Not where it counts. Managed to piss me the hell off, though.”

“R-Right.”

“Where are you headed, Bastian?” Jessica asked calmly.

“We’re thinking of taking a detour around the battlefield to drop by the capital. Not that I know what’s going on there at the moment...”

“My, my. What a coincidence. We were just on our way there ourselves.”

“Jess?!” Franziska exclaimed in surprise, but a stern look from her sister was all it took to make her shut her mouth.

Bastian cocked his head. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing... Given that we were just attacked, Franziska is a little on edge.”

“Makes sense.”

“It is very dangerous for three women to travel alone, though. If only we had a reliable gentleman accompanying us...” Jessica sighed, looking at him with pleading eyes. Martina, meanwhile, stared at them with great expectations.

Only Franziska pouted, her cheeks going red as she muttered, “Dammit... Can’t believe he saw me...”

“Um... What now?” Bastian asked Elize.

She replied as though the answer were self-evident. “It’s certainly dangerous for women to travel alone. There’s plenty of space in the carriage, so let them have a ride!”

“Is that okay?”

“I’m sure the cabman would prefer having more customers too.”

Bastian checked just in case. As Elize had predicted, the driver stated that he didn’t mind so long as he was paid.

Jessica produced a coin that was rare to see around these parts. “Will a thaler work...?” she asked. It seemed to be the Germanian currency.

The cabman accepted, and that was that—the three were along for the ride. Bastian and Elize sat beside one another on the right, while Jessica and her sisters took up the left. The carriage once again rattled into motion.

Bastian stared farther down the road. “According to the driver,

we're a day out from the warzone, so we'll be taking a detour tomorrow. It'll take three days to reach the capital."

Jessica nodded. Martina must have been worn out, as she was already asleep. There seemed to be something on Franziska's mind as she had quite the long face, but still, the carriage pressed on.

Slowly, the sun sank below the hills to the west. They had to prepare for camp before it got dark, and thankfully they had packed extra food.

Her expression unchanging as though she were wearing a mask, Jessica looked over at Elize. "Incidentally... why are you lying about being an exchange student?"

A History of the Belgian Empire

Corsets

A thinner waist doth a stunning lady make—at least, this was the mindset that prevailed around the year 700 on the Belgian imperial calendar, approximately 150 years prior to Altina's time. There were once times when even the higher classes starved, during which a plump stomach was seen as a definitive sign of wealth, but as the selective breeding of produce and advances in irrigation eliminated hunger among the rich, beauty standards changed as well. A slender waist became proof that a woman had not yet become pregnant, which men saw as a charming appeal to both youth and fertility. Unlike in the present day, the women of these times were expected only to maintain a household, birth children, and care for their families.

Corsets were introduced to help train the torso and make the waist appear slimmer. They were initially constructed of soft materials like animal hide and plant husk, but ivory and metal were eventually used to achieve a stronger bind. Corsets were held together with the same leather cord used to fasten metal armor, with blacksmiths forging the skeletal frame. They were often fastened so tightly, in fact, that women growing ill and collapsing at parties wasn't that unusual of an occurrence. In the very worst-case scenarios, they would incur permanent damage to their internal organs.

When firearms later became mainstreamed and war casualties shot up by leaps and bounds, the women who had once been expected to stay home now had to find work. The increase in working-class women led to another change in fashion trends, this time placing focus on mobility and practicality: excess ornamentation was removed, while the clothes themselves were made easier to put on and take off. Corsets, which were hard to move in and restricted one's airflow, were consequently abandoned. In their place came softer undergarments that better preserved body heat and could shape the figure in less intrusive ways.



Letters

In the year 851 on the Belgian imperial calendar, paper was still seen as a precious commodity, such that letters sent in paper envelopes were an indulgence enjoyed almost exclusively by the nobility. Traders and military personnel would simply roll their documents into scrolls and wrap them with thread, while most commoners rarely sent letters at all on account of them being unable to read.

Wax seals were used to fasten the thread around scrolls and the flaps of envelopes—hot wax was dripped in place, then pressed with a solid stamp before it hardened. While these stamps generally differed from one's house crest, they often bore at least some resemblance, and a wide variety of designs were used.

In the years that followed, an increase in both population and the nation's literacy rate would lead to a rapid surge in the number of circulating letters. With so many parcels crammed together, letters were often crushed against one another and their seals torn apart in transit.

While initially managed by the Ministry of Diplomacy, the postal system soon established itself as a separate entity and revised its rates, such that transport fees were now determined by weight rather than the number of pages being sent. Sealing wax was subsequently used much less frequently to keep sending costs low, though it still sees use to this day on wine bottles and the like.



Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess VIII*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

This time, a sudden development leads our duo on a journey to find a new path. New meetings, new partings, and a new resolve—it feels like I’m turning over a new leaf myself. I can only hope you’re enjoying it.

Next volume, Marshal General Latrielle—now with Regis as his staff officer—challenges Oswald, who has received reinforcements from Germania. Will they succeed in recapturing an occupied stronghold? And what will become of Bastian and Elize, who arrive at the capital while they’re away?

Now, if you’ll allow me a little self-promotion: *Altina the Sword Princess* has received a manga adaptation. Please look it up on Comic Clear; it’s free to read on the web.

How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord is being published under Kodansha, and I’ve also started two new series over the past two months.

First is *The Wandering Hero is Out for Gold*, published under Fujimi Fantasia Bunko. The hero who defeated the demon lord turns his sights to his newest enemy—money?! It’s a fantasy based on the premise of reclaiming swindled money through swindling.

Second is *Kantai Collection KanColle: Zuihou of the Skies and Seas*, published under Kadokawa Sneaker. Rom-coms starring the admiral are actually pretty rare. This is a set with Toshihiko Tsukiji-sensei’s *Kagerou, Dropping Anchor!*

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. You have once again provided wonderful illustrations. I know it’s been one cold day after another, but this is the season when fish tastes best. We should get together for a good meal one of these days.

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama from Afterglow. Thank you for yet another incredible design.

To my editor, Wada-sama. I’m sorry I ran so late this time... I’m really getting in the danger zone here. I’ll start writing the next volume early.

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial department, everyone involved, and to my family and friends who continue to support me.

And of course, my greatest thanks to you, dear reader, for reading this far! Thank you!

Yukiya Murasaki

Thank you
so much for
reading
volume 8!

It feels like Altina is getting
more and more sweet on Regis.
I've started to enjoy drawing
her even more than usual.

Personally, I can't wait
to see what happens next!

Murasaki-san,
Wada-san, I've
had such a good
time with this
volume.

Thank
you.



Whimsical Maid
Clarisse

“Hm?
What’s that?”

“Simply
repeat what I
was doing a
moment ago
when you
arrived.”

“Hwah!?”

Altina’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed.

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

“Why, Princess!
I know what you can do
for Mr. Regis!”

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina



“It is a pleasure
to make your
acquaintance.
I am Fanrine
Veronica de
Tiraso Laverde of
the Ministry of
Military Affairs.”

Second Daughter of
House Tiraso Laverde
Fanrine



"I can't put...
any strength
into it."

"I... I can't
continue...
as a knight
anymore."

He choked, gritting his teeth as
he held out his trembling left hand.





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by Yukiya Murasaki

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